

MEMORY AND CONNECTION IN MATERNAL GRIEF:
HARRIET BEECHER STOWE, EMILY DICKINSON, AND THE BEREAVED
MOTHER

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Introduction

“[He] had not outlived his sorrow,” writes George Eliot of her eponymous character Adam Bede, “had not felt it slip from him as a temporary burden, and leave him the same man again. Do any of us? God forbid. It would be a poor result of our anguish and our wrestling if we won nothing but our old selves at the end of it . . . let us rather be thankful that our sorrow lives in us as an indestructible force” (Eliot 507-8). The work of modern psychology, psychiatry, and social work, where efforts are made to ensure highly functioning individuals who move past sorrow, provides a stark contrast to Eliot’s nineteenth-century view of suffering. More specifically, modern approaches to grief demand that in response to the disruption of death, the bereaved should bring an end to grief stricken thoughts, behaviors, and emotions and return to previous levels of functioning within one year after the death of the beloved.¹ Because of a focus on coping, closure, and functionality, these disciplines regularly, if perhaps unintentionally, discredit the validity of mothers’ responses to infant and child death, which tend to display long-term, high-intensity grief.² Bereaved mothers exhibit extreme and long-lasting

¹ The section for “Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder” in the *DSM-V* provides both definitional constraints and a time frame of six months to a year to delineate normal grief from persistent grief. Likewise, current proposed guidelines for the diagnosis of “Prolonged Grief Disorder” in the *International Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision* gives six months as the limit for normal grief response, while allowing for “longer periods in some cultural contexts” as defined by the individuals in the patient’s environment (definitions provided by G.M. Reed in M. Katherine Shear’s article “Complicated Grief” in *The New England Journal of Medicine*). Also see, for example, *Psychology Today* editor Carlin Flora’s effort to present the APA’s position on disordered bereavement: “some people feel consistently upset and preoccupied with the person who has passed away, to the point where their relationships and work suffer for months on end. Such a reaction is known as ‘complicated grief’” (“A Complicated Grief” in *psychologytoday.com*).

² In an article questioning the validity of defining prolonged grief as a mental disorder, Birgit Wagner, professor of Psychosomatic Medicine and Psychotherapy at the University of Leipzig, points out that as many as seventy-eight percent of bereaved parents appear to retain intense grief reactions beyond one year. By contrast, M. Katherine Shear, director of the Center for Complicated Grief at Columbia University, suggests that about two to three percent of the population worldwide is affected by complicated, or prolonged, grief (see her article “Complicated Grief”).

emotionality, “neuroticism,” and “negative bereavement outcomes.”³ Yet, literature throughout the ages presents such maternal responses as emotionally logical, while approaches to suffering and bereavement in the nineteenth century, as epitomized by Harriet Beecher Stowe and Emily Dickinson, allow for a positive assessment of mothers’ long-term and passionate grief.

The death of a young child violently reveals a mother’s own vulnerability, upsetting assumptions about safety and well-being and awakening an uncomfortable awareness of mortality.⁴ Writers who employ this storyline closely examine the bodily and spiritual realities of humanity through the mother’s experience of her child’s death. By doing so they also illuminate maternal grieving practices. Some authors frame the narratives within a pilgrimage motif,⁵ or reveal the destructive consequences of rejecting the validity of this pilgrimage narrative in regard to grief.⁶ Other writers employ ancient grief narratives, reaching back to classical stories and poems where the mother’s dangerous passion and defiance are highlighted. Demeter is a classic image of fury in maternal grief. Authors who employ this ancient storyline mark it with wildness or insanity and frequently employ images of a journey, whether that journey involves a search for the lost one, physical or mental escape, or another form of flight. Stories that represent maternal grief link fury to the vulnerability or powerlessness of the bereaved, which other characters may define as madness. Poets engage ideas of fury and madness

³ See T. Robinson and S.J. Marwit, “An Investigation of the Relationship of Personality, Coping, and Grief Intensity Among Bereaved Mothers,” for an example of this common perspective.

⁴ Beyond the philosophical understanding that the death of the other is linked to one’s own death, research on bereavement reveals a connection between grief and personal fear of death (Barr & Cacciatore).

⁵ For example, James Joyce in *Ulysses* and Fyodor Dostoyevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

⁶ e.g., the destructive consequences of the husband’s response to his wife’s grief in Robert Frost’s narrative poem “Home Burial.”

within grief, often directly referencing Demeter,⁷ while novelists contrast mannered silencing with maternal grief's natural violence.⁸ Some authors emphasize the mother's response of defiant vigilance in memory and love as a contrast to Demeter's dangerous and destructive grief.⁹ For all of these authors, the mother's continued vigilance is treated as expected, if not virtuous, while intensity, violence, and even madness are represented as ordinary responses to a child's death. While many of these authors treat grief as a forced pilgrimage, they also question the possibility of returning to a previous state of psychological balance,¹⁰ and, by contrast, the mothers in their stories and poems resist external pressure for closure and silence.¹¹

⁷ e.g., Eavan Boland ("The Pomegranate," "And Soul"), Anne Sexton ("The Abortion," "Praying to Big Jack," "For God While Sleeping"), Alfred Tennyson ("Demeter and Persephone"), A.E. Stallings (poems about Persephone in *Archaic Smile* and *Hapax*), Gabriela Mistral ("The Hollow Walnut," for example), Kathleen Raine ("The Transit of the Gods") and Barbara Crooker ("Demeter," among others). Some poets focus in on the tragic loss of the innocent child, assuming, but eliding, the mother's response, or otherwise entering more fully into the child's experience, either the process of dying, the experience of Hades, or within a Christianized afterlife, i.e., the child at Christ's knee. See, for example, Maria White Lowell ("The Morning Glory") Emily Dickinson ("Because I could not stop for death"), Christina Rossetti ("Holy Innocents" and "Unspotted lambs to follow the one Lamb" from *Some Feasts and Fasts*, and "Young Death") and Carolyn Kizer ("Persephone Pauses").

⁸ e.g., Hannah Foster (*The Coquette*), Fanny Fern (*Ruth Hall*), and Harriet Beecher Stowe (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*). Poet Kathleen Raine points toward this in "The Transit of the Gods," and Phillis Wheatley uses the story of Niobe to examine the motive for silence in the bereaved mother in her poem "Niobe in Distress for her Children slain by Apollo, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book VI. and from a view of a Painting of Mr. Richard Wilson."

⁹ As in Anna Ahkmatova's *Requiem*, especially "X Crucifixion," Gwendolyn Brooks's "the mother," William Wordsworth's "Maternal Grief," and Maeve Brennan's "The Eldest Child" and "The Springs of Affection." In his poem "Niobe" Alfred Noyes, echoing Tennyson ("Demeter and Persephone") and Shakespeare (*The Winter's Tale*), links the bereaved mother's "frozen" and "stone" silence with a pity that allows for the speaking and prayer of others.

¹⁰ Fern, Ahkmatova, Brennan, Dostoyevsky, Dickinson, and Frost ("Home Burial") all engage this image of forward, or outward, movement, and their storylines repudiate a sense of backward action. Meanwhile, Joyce specifically highlights an openness to return and reunion that exists for Bloom and Molly only within their open-ended grief.

¹¹ Resistance to the pressure for closure and silence exists in literature and poetry across time and location. Dostoyevsky presents female resistance in the story of the "Women of Faith" in the *Brothers Karamazov*, while Anna Ahkmatova writes of her own resistance to silence and forgetfulness in *Requiem*. Anne Bradstreet defends her lasting grief in "In Memory of My Dear Grandchild Elizabeth Bradstreet, Who Deceased August, 1665, Being a Year and Half Old," while the mother in Wordsworth's "Maternal Grief" affirms her sorrow as "immortal as the love that gave it being." Frost reveals a fight for continued attachment and lasting grief within the bereaved mother, while for James Joyce, lasting maternal (and paternal) grief is itself the impetus for continued connection in *Ulysses*.

Such representations question current cultural assumptions about how to grieve, how long to grieve, and how, and if, grief ends. Literary examples of maternal grief regularly present what the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* terms persistent complex bereavement disorder,¹² otherwise referred to as complicated or pathological grief, since the mothers in these stories and poems experience grief that is extremely disruptive, dislocating, and long lasting.¹³ Literary representations of bereaved mothers present a challenge to current definitions of complicated grief, and the perspective of poets and authors contest the limitations on appropriate grief as defined by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). In “A New Approach to Complicated Grief” on the APA website, staff writer and therapist Karen Kersting refers to complicated grief as a condition that is “more severe than the average loss-related life transition,” and “is marked by broad changes to all personal relationships, a sense of meaninglessness, a prolonged yearning or searching for the deceased and a sense of rupture in personal beliefs” (51). By this same definition, normal grief is usually resolved within six months to a year. Resolution within this categorization means that knowledge of the death has been reconciled with former beliefs, the experience of loss has been integrated into one’s view of life, and life returns to its former emotional balance, even if this balance is colloquially referred to as a “new normal.”¹⁴

Complicated grief may, however, be the normative response for mothers when a young child dies. Mothers are more likely to be labelled with this designation since they

¹² The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5 or DSM-V)*, produced by the American Psychiatric Association, is the authoritative classification and diagnostic tool for mental or psychiatric disorders, and the only such tool produced or used within the mental-health and medical fields.

¹³ See Friedman for this definition of grief as psychological illness.

¹⁴ See Kersting, Neimeyer et al., Shear et al., Pies and *DSM-5*.

are both parents and women. In a statistical analysis that combined the results of more than a thousand studies addressing fetal and early infant loss, K.J. Gold et al. concluded that the death of an infant can cause prolonged or complicated bereavement for many parents at least partly because of the trauma associated with this unexpected event (230). In another meta-analysis, Shear et al. also concluded that complicated grief occurs in higher rates among individuals who have experienced the death of a child.¹⁵ Thus, in the current perspective, experiencing either an unexpected death or the death of a child puts one at higher risk for complicated grief.¹⁶ And since most child or infant deaths are unexpected, a double risk factor is present for most parents. In addition, women are at a higher risk of developing complicated grief disorder across all types of losses.¹⁷ Thus, being the mother of a deceased child produces a situation in which a woman is doubly vulnerable to this label. Indeed, such vulnerability reveals the normative status of this intense grief experience, since bereaved mothers do not tend to quickly return to a previous state of emotional balance.

Social scientists, especially those within the APA, who control the cultural conversation about grief, produce confining definitions of appropriate grief, which are both affected by and affect the larger culture's discomfort with death and bereavement. With this longer lasting maternal grief in mind, it is alarming that various sets of definitions controlled by the APA even more broadly delineate a bereaved mother as mentally ill when external signs of her grief extend beyond a time that is comfortable for

¹⁵ See also Kersting. See Robinson & Marwit for an example of the implementation of this perspective in research on bereaved mothers.

¹⁶ Shear et al. 2, see also Kersting.

¹⁷ Shear et al., Kersting.

the people around her.¹⁸ This is especially disconcerting in a culture that is made uncomfortable by almost any confrontation with death and attendant grief.¹⁹ The experience of bereaved mothers is relevant in a broader sense to efforts within the APA for constructing grief definitions since persistent complex bereavement disorder has not yet achieved diagnostic status as a mental disorder and is currently listed as a condition for further study in the *DSM-5*. But most relevant here, considering the regularity of intense grief in regard to child death, current APA definitions reveal a gender bias.²⁰

Freud first imagined a binary between appropriate and inappropriate grief in his influential *Mourning and Melancholia*, and proponents of and researchers in the fields of psychiatry and psychology have embraced and perpetuated this binary ever since. Freud, the most brilliant mythmaker of the past century,²¹ was the first to claim that grief that lasts too long is psychotic, and the first to so blatantly demand that the male-gendered effort for closure and distance was superior to the female-gendered effort toward memory and connection.²² Sensitive writers in the social work field like Nancy J. Moules repeat the mantra that grief is by nature complicated, that it must be trusted and welcomed, and that sufferers require, above all, a place “where grief is accepted and expected” (135), but official APA guidelines (and with them the culture at large) remain unchanged. Even

¹⁸ See Friedman, Kersting, Neimeyer et al., Shear et al., Pies and *DSM-5*

¹⁹ See, for example, DeSpelder & Strickland 5-6.

²⁰ In *The Madness of Women—Myth and Experience*, Jane M. Ussher points out that women are more likely to be positioned as mad than men, arguing that diagnostic categories “reflect the interest of particular groups of experts, who reify their right to regulate those deemed mad through the diagnosis of an ever increasing array of pathological conditions, supported by [the DSM]” (Ussher 7, 4). In a similar vein, Dorothy Berkson, in her analysis of female writers who engage the question of how the values of motherhood can be better incorporated into the culture at large, explains that it is difficult for women’s stories to be heard because they are filtered through the language and structures of the dominant, male culture and “are ignored, misinterpreted, or even defined as mad” (101).

²¹ See Bloom, Harold, “Freud: A Shakespearean Reading,” in *The Western Canon*.

²² See Gilbert, Sandra M. “Widow” in *Death’s Door*.

when public statements controlled by the APA and other power positions within the Psy-disciplines overtly affirm the extended and on-going nature of parental grief, authors regularly insert the language of complicated grief, and thereby covertly criticize those they intend to support.²³ In addition, while recent views of grief reject the idea of getting over grief and affirm lasting connection and sorrow, and the medical community is abandoning metaphors of letting go and closure while moving toward concepts and language that foster a continuing bond with the deceased,²⁴ cultural assumptions that mourning should be limited still prevail, and the APA promotes this view both intentionally and unintentionally. For example, Robert A. Neimeyer, who sits on the committee for the assessment of persistent complex bereavement disorder as a condition for further study, argues that complicated grief is dangerous because it is painful and interferes with normal functioning. He employs a narrative approach to grief, but attempts to impose time and definitional constraints while using the language of backward movement, with a goal to re-establish a coherent self-narrative and to resolve any incongruence between the reality of death and one's sense of safety and meaning.²⁵ It is telling that even narrative-based therapies continue to resist the mother's belief that her

²³ See, for example, "The Death of a Child, The Grief of the Parents: A Lifetime Journey" at ndhealth.gov.

²⁴ e.g., Rosenblatt, Moules.

²⁵ Page 75. Neimeyer and colleagues propose therapeutic actions to help clients return to healthy levels of functioning following bereavement (73). The authors' proposed methods are situated within the constructivist approach to psychology, which emphasizes "people's need to impose meaning on their life experiences" (74). The article includes two case studies that exemplify the therapy by applying the strategies of narrative retelling, therapeutic writing, visualizations, and using and examining metaphorical language (74). The approach employs affirmation of a pro-symptom position (80). Yet, the authors persist in the belief that therapy should help the client return to former core assumptions such as a belief in control over one's life and one's worthiness of positive outcomes, and in the conviction of a generally benevolent world. These authors believe that returning to such convictions helps the bereaved achieve meaning and create coherence in narratives and belief systems by either assimilating the loss experience into pre-loss beliefs and narratives, or by accommodating the loss through "reorganizing, deepening, or expanding their beliefs and self-narrative to embrace the reality of the loss," including looking for hidden benefits to the death (74). Regarding the goal of reorganizing beliefs and narratives, see also Leader 111-13.

grief has no temporal boundary. Proponents of such therapies miss the irony of their position in light of the bereaved mother's recognition that a profitable result of the suffering caused by death (but never of the death itself) involves the abandonment of such illusory views as those to which they aim to return her.

Because of the stance of the APA, bereaved mothers are particularly vulnerable to the judgment of persistent complex bereavement disorder. Defining intense grief as mental illness further imperils grieving mothers by situating them within the already marginalized group of those termed mentally diseased. Mental illness joins physical illness in our society as something to be excluded from normative life and dealt with by medical professionals. As bereavement researcher and author Phyllis Silverman argues, "the view of grief as an illness permeates many layers of society as a continuation of the invisible death [Philippe] Ariès describes. Grief is taken to the 'doctor's office,' where it can be contained and controlled and will not intrude on the life of the community."²⁶ Literary representations of maternal grief expose the power and effects of efforts that isolate and silence bereaved mothers, but they also reveal ways in which grief connects the bereaved to her community (even when members of the community resist this connection). Authors present unsettled and undetermined grief, and in these works such open-ended grief often facilitates positive community interaction.

Thus, the restrictive grief definitions and timelines established within medicine and the social sciences can be complicated, challenged, and even refuted by the intellectual work of the humanities, and especially through a careful look at imaginative literature. George Eliot speaks of the consequences of loss in a way counter to current

²⁶ As quoted in DeSpelder and Strickland, page 329.

cultural standards: “Deep unspeakable suffering may well be called a baptism, a regeneration, the initiation into a new state” (445). For Eliot, this new, lasting state results from a forced forward movement. Modern societies seem to oppose this initiation,²⁷ exhibiting desires to ignore or deny the validity of the new knowledge that a confrontation with suffering, and especially death, creates. This avoidance of death in modern society makes it difficult for those forced to confront its reality to speak of it, for the outer witnesses of this experience desire its silence and disappearance.

In addition to imposed separation, the death of the other confronts us with the incontrovertible reality of our own mortality, no death more so than the death of one’s own child. Critic René Girard writes that “novels are full of signs announcing death” (290, 283).²⁸ Yet the ironic exclusion of a central female experience, the death of a child,²⁹ from our shared literature creates a linguistic and experiential deficiency. And as a result, bereaved mothers fail to find their stories represented, and our culture lacks language to inscribe infant and child death as both common and traumatic. Coupled with cultural norms that demand a distant, stoical response to death, and an especial discomfort with witnessing the deaths of infants and young children, this omission may itself add to the bereaved mother’s feeling that there is a conspiracy to ignore her grief

²⁷ See, for example, Ariès, *Western Attitudes towards Death*; Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*; and Horwitz, *The Loss of Sadness*.

²⁸ Regarding the meaning of the novel, Girard seems to agree with Flannery O’Connor, who argued that it exists for the moment of grace within the recognition of extreme poverty, i.e., mortality. Likewise, Girard holds that within the confrontation with death, “the patient” receives “clarity of vision” and is “cured” (290).

²⁹ Searching for them made known to me many stories and poems that involve this experience. However, glancing through anthologies like *The Premier Book of Major Poets* edited by Anita Dore or *The Best Poems of the English Language* edited by Harold Bloom reveals no apparent work that mentions child death. While not reproducing it in his book, Bloom does take time to complain that Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “The Cry of the Children” is “very bad . . . where the sentiments are admirable but the expression is wearisome” (725). Even the works included in an anthology as broad and relevant as *Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers*, edited by Karen L. Kilcup, possess only slight reference to this topic.

and to keep her from fully experiencing or expressing it. Bereaved mothers (and fathers) often describe this feeling, especially when the child died as an infant.³⁰ Thus, a benefit of gathering and highlighting this literature is to give voice to this painful and silenced experience. Beyond this use, however, carefully reading these stories and poems can inform how we read and interpret the grief of others, bereaved mothers especially, and can thereby inform how we define and relate to these women.

Grief theory in literary criticism seeks to read literature through the lens of one of the psychological or psychiatric models that describes a predictable grief pattern. For those who reject this reductive interpretation of grief, trauma theory provides another lens. Yet, trauma theory historically defines intense grief as unspeakable, in spite of evidence that writers of fiction and poetry do effectively give voice to the experience of suffering, even in its most extreme forms.³¹ By contrast, my work questions how social science theories about intense grief and trauma can be informed by story and poetry through observation of the approaches and language writers have used to portray maternal grief, examination of the ways maternal grief functions within plot and structure, and analysis of the functions of the author's entry into the bereaved mother's perspective.³²

³⁰ See Rosenblatt, pages 93-101, for example. Parents report feeling that, "they want my feelings to go away" (94); "Most of them don't realize how long the grief goes on . . . Most of them think it's over. If they don't experience it, they think in two weeks it's gone" (95); and "I really felt like I was goin' it alone. My parents nothing . . . Nobody says anything around her birthday" (99). Another mother is reported as saying, "that isn't helpful, when somebody comes up to us and tells you, 'Well, you've got to *get over it*. You got to forget about her.' . . . You can't forget her. You *can't* . . . because anybody in their right mind would know that you can't forget a loved one; you just can't" (117, emphasis original).

³¹ Pederson, for one, brilliantly argues the seemingly obvious-- that people can and do give voice to even the most traumatic events in their lives.

³² Within the humanities, we currently reject the systemization of literature that Western thought has historically demanded. By contrast, Girard reminds us that "the great writers apprehend intuitively and concretely, through the medium of their art, if not formally, the system in which they were first imprisoned together with their contemporaries. Literary interpretation must be systematic because it is the continuation of literature. It should formalize implicit or already half-explicit systems" (*Deceit* 3). Girardian reasoning

Literary examples show gaps in the medical and social sciences' considerations of grief. A broad range of literary works treats long-term grief in the form of lasting memory, as well as an awareness of this memory's potential benefits, as a natural response to the death of a child. The touchstone images of Demeter and Mary work against any idea of a return to a former state of "normalcy," since the redeemed mother-child relationships are transmuted, and eternal disruption lasts even for these mothers who regain their lost children. Authors show grieving mothers rebelling against cultural pressures toward silence through participation in dangerous anger or compassionate action. Grounded in maternal values, this literary context opposes the *DSM-5*'s foundational assumptions on grief and its goals for treatment, especially in regard to mothers' grief.

In spite of the comparative scarcity of literature employing this common experience, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Emily Dickinson write within a literary history of representations and responses that provide a framework of common themes and approaches to this loss. Like others, they mark shared experience and force it upon their reader. Specifically, they represent maternal child loss as compelling a movement into a new state and recognize the lasting pain and disruption of this loss. Stowe asks the reader to use suffering as a means to reform the heart to prepare it for compassionate action. Meanwhile, Dickinson invokes Job to question God and protest suffering and death. But

reflects classical Aristotelian Poetics, which can still inform an argument for the legitimacy of literature as a lens with which to view social theory. For Aristotle, poetry, or imaginative writing, reflects the true and universal. "It is evident," he writes, "that it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen . . . poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. By the universal, I mean how a person of a certain type will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity; and it is this universality at which poetry aims in the names she attaches to the personages" (Aristotle's *Poetics*, section IX).

she ultimately seeks to embrace this experience and, like Job, shake from it some secret truth. Indeed, as Chapter one of this thesis establishes, the perspectives elucidated in Stowe and Dickinson represent the central western stance toward suffering and the meaning of death until the influence of Freud.

The first chapter, “Maternal Grief as Extension,” briefly introduces authors who have written about infant and child death and maternal responses to this loss, keeping in mind that this inquiry exists within the context of a larger question about the place of suffering. This contextual background examines common definitions, expectations, and metaphors in stories and poetry that engage maternal grief. The question of how writers treat this particular grief begins with ancient classical treatments of the story of Demeter and Persephone and literary representations of Mary’s grief after the death of Jesus. Homer, Ovid, the writers of the Gospels of *Luke* and *John*, Shakespeare, Fanny Fern, Hannah Foster, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and James Joyce, among others, establish an artistic, visionary context for writing about this kind of loss. In order to reference and illuminate the most hidden experiences of maternal loss and in order to situate the mother most fully in her role as vigilant child-bearer, this context focuses on maternal responses to the deaths of children under the age of ten (thus avoiding children who are biologically in or approaching adolescence) and specifically excludes representations of the deaths of adult children, except in the cases of the foundational Greek and Latin texts.

When portrayals of child death are present, a diverse array of imaginative literature points to the expectation of extreme grief as a reasonable response to the loss of a child. The literature of this tradition presents the mother’s tendency to yield to an

external will for silence, which is contrasted with her resistance to this silence through fury or compassion. In these works, bereaved mothers regularly refuse to integrate or accept loss, and authors interpret this powerful response as fury. On the other hand, grieving mothers often exhibit compassion, also predicated on a refusal to accept the loss. This movement toward sympathy facilitates the bereaved mother's connection to her community, as well as to her dead child. Both forms of resistance are predicated upon the mother's self-perceived right to memory. Many of these representations reveal the initiated mother's new and lasting connection to the reality of death, which feminist critic Sandra M. Gilbert refers to as the bereaved one's consequent "affinity" with death. Memory anchors affinity with death, an adjusted perspective that constitutes a lasting awareness of death's nearness.

The theme of maternal grief, significant in the Classical period, deeply interested Victorian writers. Victorian society allowed for the publication of imaginative work that engaged child-death and maternal grief, perhaps because they condoned extreme forms of grief and mourning and positioned women as sentinels of memory. To grasp the nineteenth-century's perspective of memory and mourning, one has only to picture the black-frocked and emotional grandmother of Europe, Queen Victoria, who responded to the death of Prince Albert by wearing black for forty years, and then demanded a white funeral and chose to be buried in her wedding veil.³³ Nineteenth-century writers exist at the intersection of the Victorian era's cultural openness to grief and a long-standing literary perspective on mothers' grief that places bereavement at the center of maternal identity and relationships. Against the backdrop of the literary

³³ See biographies of Queen Victoria by Elizabeth Longford and Cecil Woodham-Smith.

tradition of mothers' grief set out in chapter one, chapters two and three explore the work of nineteenth-century American women writers Stowe and Dickinson as it interacts with the experience of maternal grief, highlighting the roles of fury and compassion in grief, and the possibility of connection within suffering, especially within shared maternal grief.

The second chapter, "Harriet Beecher Stowe and Maternal Memory as (Com)passionate Action," examines responses to and uses of maternal grief in Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Her work possesses a natural affinity with the purpose of this essay since the novel represents a counterpoint to a set of critical attitudes devaluing relatively more feminine-gendered responses to personal suffering and existential questions. Literary critics' responses to some of this era's perspectives provide us with a clear witness of the patriarchal censure of female gendered responses to suffering, in which the psy-disciplines participate when they define appropriate grief responses from a male-gendered perspective. Critic Jane P. Tompkins positions *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a "dazzling exemplar" of the subversive nineteenth-century "story of salvation through motherly love" (542). She points out that the novel, "[along with other] popular domestic novels of the nineteenth century represents a monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman's point of view" (541). The sentimental novel, of which *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the nonpareil, possesses the chief characteristic, according to Tompkins, of being "written by, for, and about women" (541).

Furthermore, while *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is most often read as antislavery fiction, it also acts as an account of Stowe's interactions with her own (and others') maternal grief. Stowe herself linked these two ways of reading her work. In her introduction to the novel,

Elizabeth Ammons writes that Harriet Beecher Stowe “had six children; and it was motherhood and the death of her beloved baby Charley, she later said, which quickened her empathy with enslaved Africans” (viii). She quotes Stowe: “It was at [Charley’s] dying bed and at his grave that I learned what a poor slave mother may feel when her child is torn away from her” (viii). Stowe does not directly represent her own experience of the death of her child. Rather she assumes this point of connection between women and then uses it as a motive for compassion and moral action on behalf of the other. In direct addresses in the novel, Stowe often assumes this shared experience of loss among mothers. Her presentations of maternal responses to child death seek to access and intensify feelings within the reader to break down any barrier between the bereaved and the observer. Likewise, in the novel we witness this collapse of distance and obstructions between mothers based on their shared grief. This sense of connection supports Stowe’s object of building bridges between the races.

While Tompkins points out that this novel was, “in almost any terms one can think of, the most important book of the century” (541), critic Ann-Janine Morey observes that Stowe is the reference point for masculinist prejudices that define the female American-novelistic tradition with disparaging terms like popularity, emotionality, religiosity, and domesticity (123). Yet reading this novel through the lens of maternal grief re-views and reassigns these terms, acknowledging her use of bereavement as a mode of access to the shared, sympathetic, faithful, and inward. Morey argues that Stowe’s “women bear the burden of grieving for the loss of children and loved ones,” and that this grief “prepares women for the most universal of sympathies,” which Morey terms “mourning on behalf of unredeemed humanity” (750). Stowe’s

novels even go beyond the doctrine expressed in Morey's phrase, however, since they reassign the evangelical imperative of mourning on behalf of the unredeemed as simply mourning on behalf of humanity, i.e., the other. Of course, Stowe's most important use of feminine grief is toward the racial other.

Death and suffering are core realities from which Stowe draws a motivation for right behavior, whether it be in her sentimental treatments of the deaths of Evangeline and Uncle Tom, or the countless reminders of the final judgment. She takes the greatest interest, however, in what she offers as a paradox of maternal grief. She presents conventional representations of maternal loss that are excessive and dangerous to the point of destruction, but she also offers stories (even the same stories) in which the mother's continued grief brings about connection and sympathetic action. My inquiry focuses on the chapters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in which Eliza interacts with Senator and Mrs. Bird, and where grief over her young son's recent death influences Mrs. Bird's response to Eliza and her young son Harry, as well as her maternal response to Eliza's prospective grief, all within the context of a novel about the loss of children—both young and old.

By contrast, Emily Dickinson, whose work falls fairly outside the sentimentalist, popular, and domestic writing of her day, did not experience the death of her child. Neither does she overtly address the experience of maternal grief in her poetry or clearly detail either the effect of grief on herself or on her sister-in-law, whose bereavement at the death of her young son inspires the triptych of poems I examine in my final chapter, "Emily Dickinson and Maternal Grief as Unknowing Knowing." In October 1883, Dickinson's eight-year-old nephew Thomas Gilbert Dickinson contracted typhoid fever

and died (Buell 331, Johnson 799). Dickinson's "nervous shock" and "delicate condition" following the death speak to biographer Richard B. Sewall's assertion that she "never fully recovered from [this] death" (146, 206, see also 587). "It was a staggering loss," he adds (206), and Dickinson attests in a letter to Mrs. Josiah Gilbert Holland that she was soon diagnosed as having "nervous prostration," adding, "possibly I have—I do not know the Names of Sickness. The Crisis of the sorrow of so many years is all that tires me" (letter 873). Letters to friends that speak of Gilbert's death, including letters of condolence to her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson, contain language attempting to confront the enigmas of hope and loss. The letters to Susan immediately following Gilbert's death include both explicit and embedded poems.³⁴

The poems of consolation in these letters unsettle the reader with the use of paradox within a journey metaphor and provide a complicated solace. Dickinson's language combined with her forceful occupation of her sister-in-law's suffering speak to both her perspective on the meaning of loss and the expansiveness of maternal loss in particular. This chapter focuses on three poems and the letters that contain them: Johnson letter 868, containing Franklin poem 1624, "Pass to thy Rendezvous of Light"; Johnson letter 870, signed, but otherwise containing only the poem "Climbing to reach the costly Hearts," Franklin poem 1626; and Johnson letter 871, containing Franklin poem 1625, "Expanse cannot be lost," one version of a poem she wrote earlier and later reworked.

This letters reveal how Dickinson demands entry into her sister-in-law's maternal grief and ultimately appropriates it for her own imaginative use. In this treatment, shared grief is assumed, and the bereaved person's affinity with death is the cornerstone of both

³⁴ See *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Vol. 3. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1965, pp. 799-801.

Dickinson's art and her continued relationship with her sister-in-law. While apparently using her sister-in-law's grief for her own apprehension of the apophatic and irreducible mysteries at the heart of loss, her contradictory effort to both console and unsettle her sister-in-law in these poems points toward potential communal benefits in extended and intense maternal grief. Dickinson's letters and poems validate the significance of Susan's loss and approve furious questioning of God, while indicating no expectation of silence from the bereaved mother. Further, Dickinson displays a maternal impulse toward the acknowledgement of shared suffering that allows her to give language to her sister-in-law's experience. But Dickinson also seeks to use grief to push Susan toward the apprehension of a mystery, an experience Dickinson also seeks for herself. Significantly, this method of understanding her sister-in-law's grief facilitates continued attachment.

These poems rest in a context of Dickinson's deep interest in the reality of death. Critic Ruth Flanders McNaughton states that at least one-sixth of Dickinson's poems deal directly with Death, a word that McNaughton points out the poet almost always capitalized (203). But even a cursory reading reveals that more than one-sixth of them include references to death. Thomas W. Ford asserts that a careful examination of Dickinson's poetry shows death to be a "theme of major importance at every stage of [her] creative development," adding that "Dickinson's intense interest in death was the most important single factor in shaping the contours of her poetry" (14). As her life proceeded, Emily Dickinson's personal bereavements amassed.³⁵ In her later years, Dickinson wrote many letters of condolence to friends and family, often including or embedding her own (and sometimes others') poems about death or grief within these

³⁵ As is clear from her biography (see Sewall or emilydickinsonmuseum.org). Buell makes an effort to list these increasing losses on pages 331-2 of her article "'A Slow Solace': Emily Dickinson and Consolation."

letters. Based on her extant letters and poems, Dickinson wrote comparatively more letters and fewer poems in her later years. Thus, during this time letters seem to have become a key component of her creative output (Buell 324).

These later letters and poems represent some of the poet's most imaginative and powerful work. Dickinson attempts the difficult task of wresting consolation out of what critics such as McNaughton and Janet Buell have shown to be extremely ambivalent views of death and the afterlife. In her essay, "Messages of Condolence," critic Jane Donahue Eberwein points to a letter of consolation that Dickinson wrote to her cousins Louise and Frances Norcross (Johnson L278) as "a transition from sentimental and even formulaic early attempts at comfort" to mature writing that while sometimes reflecting "the genteel Christian culture in which she was raised" often deviated from it (102). Thus, although Dickinson interacted with contemporary modes of consolation, her writings maintain her typical slant and transform traditional ideas of solace (Buell 330). Certainly, in the poetry contained within her letters, Dickinson employs obstacles against easy answers, repeatedly ending in dark perplexity rather than a straightforward verdict. She also retains the same complication of poetic form that we find elsewhere in her poetry.

Both Stowe and Dickinson sought to unsettle their readers by the use of assumed grief. Dickinson shared in her sister-in-law's grief in the way Stowe involved her readers in a common and communal experience. Indeed, her effort to access the loss of the other suggests Dickinson saw grief in general, and this grief in particular, as not belonging exclusively to the bereaved, but as a shared experience and emotion. This speaking, intense, and open-ended grief reveals a participation in death common to Stowe and

Dickinson, and their awareness of our existential position in the face of loss points to an acceptance of more extreme forms of grief, which their work illustrates as normal, beneficial, and potentially desired.

Likewise, these works testify to the importance of speaking “of death and the dead because if those who have died are still part of us even while they are a part of death, then death is part of us too” (Gilbert 16). Resisting pressure to yield to an external demand for silence, authors allow compassion to emerge in themselves, in their characters, and in their readers. Recognizing the normalcy and shared reality of loss allows for connection between the bereaved and her community. It also helps the grieving mother retain her connection to the dead beloved. The mothers in these stories and poems exert their right to memory, and their responses suggest extreme grief to be a natural response to the death of a young child. Most importantly, these representations point toward the initiated mother’s permanent connection to, and intentional attentiveness to, death. By contrast, current definitions of complicated grief and official limitations on appropriate grief, as set forth by the APA, reject, inadvertently perhaps, the validity of lasting memory and an awareness of its potential benefits.

Chapter 1: Maternal Grief as Extension

The stories of Demeter and of Mary testify to the centrality of grief to motherhood. Many stories of infant and child loss engage these two central images to explore the bereaved mother's tendency to yield to an external will for silence or to contrast this silence with the mother's resistance to it through fury, an anger often directed at the gods, patriarchal law, or individuals in positions of power. A grieving mother's passionate fury sometimes transmutes into compassion, directed toward other bereaved mothers, her community, or the suffering world. The grieving mother's compassion, whether toward a particular person or a generalized suffering other, encompasses a sympathetic acknowledgement of shared loss. Demeter embodies resistance through fury, while Mary embodies compassion. But whichever touchstone image the author employs, bereaved mothers unfailingly remember their dead children; their lasting memory fuels both fury and compassion. If the mother transmutes fury to compassion, her assiduous memory may facilitate positive community interaction. By contrast, unmitigated fury is portrayed as dangerous and destructive, often straining relationships in the wider community, even though fury provides a way for the less-powerful to do battle against the powerful, and therefore works as a protection for the bereaved mother or her other children, especially when fury allows for speech. Regardless of the internal emotional and external communal outcome, a diverse array of imaginative literature points to extreme grief as an expected emotional response to the death of one's child. And many representations reveal the initiated mother's lasting emotional connection to both the dead child and to a new conception of the reality of death, or Gilbert's "affinity with death."

Authors themselves participate in this affinity with death by entering into what writer and psychoanalyst Darian Leader terms a dialogue of mourning. Leader points out that Freud disregards the social dimension of mourning and instead construes it as a purely private event (71). By contrast, Leader writes about the benefits of perceiving “that other people are mourning too” (75). Public displays of grief allow “each individual to access their own losses”; likewise, because of this “social, shared aspect,” fictional accounts of death and mourning contribute to the ability of readers to access their own grief, so that “the public facilitates the private” (76-77). Readers, therefore, can “borrow” the mourning of others since they “make something from how other people had represented their own grief” to enter into a dialogue of mourning (78). While pointing out how this contact with the grief of others facilitates entry into one’s own grief and provides ways to represent loss, he also enumerates potentially negative consequences of the denial of this shared mourning. However, Leader participates in Freud’s apparent fear of a too close “proximity of grief” since, in his perspective, shared grief can also lead to a sense of terror. Thus, while he views repression as dangerous, he also expresses apprehension toward connection in grief. This view affirms Freud’s belief that mourners must “kill the dead” (114-115, 144). While the field of psychotherapy tends to recognize a “long and arduous process” in grieving (201), this process concludes with the removal of the dead, i.e., a loosening of bonds and completed separation (144-148). Beyond Freud, this removal of the dead refers to the belief that the bereaved should no longer demonstrate persistent yearning for the deceased, intense sorrow and emotional pain in response to the death, or preoccupation with the deceased or with the circumstances of the death. Meanwhile, all bitterness or anger should be resolved, along with all feelings

of detachment; confusion about one's role in life or sense of identity should be resolved; the bereaved should be functioning well and grief must not be "out of proportion" with norms (criteria from *DSM-5*). By contrast, writers who engage stories of maternal loss present the possibility of living with death and the departed. For them, killing the dead means denying memory and the connections contained therein. They do not deny the alterity or absence of the other, but reject the notion of any extreme otherness that would block familiarity or connection.

In accordance, classical grief narratives reject the possibility of a maternal response of silence, acceptance, or the removal of the dead. Instead, they highlight the mother's fearful passion and defiance in response to the loss of a child, especially in the image of the furious Demeter, whose grief is marked with wildness. Likewise, authors employing the Demeter myth rest the bereaved mother's fury on her relative vulnerability and powerlessness, and others in the mother's community define this fury as madness. Homer employs a journey motif that other writers use in re-producing Demeter's search for the lost Persephone. In this case, representations point toward the mother's physical or mental escape, sometimes spiritualizing this experience within a pilgrimage motif. Pilgrimage as a spiritual journey conflicts with the return (often fused with a silencing in the bereaved mother's mind) to which the mother is pressured. Pilgrimage opens up to the idea of devotion, and unlike the more general journey metaphor, points toward a spiritual destination with benefits for the mother and her community. Further, this destination rests somewhere beyond the idea of simple return.

"She was visited by grief that was even more terrible than before; it makes you think of the hound of hades," writes Homer of the goddess Demeter, whose search for her

daughter Persephone ends in the realization that she has been abducted by Hades, the god of death (90-91). Homer compares this mother's grief to the terrifying many-headed, serpent-tailed dog who guards the gates of the underworld to prevent the dead from leaving. Through this comparison, Homer connects Demeter's grief to the gate that neither dead nor living pass. Consequently, her grief becomes mysteriously representative of this gate. Demeter's relentless search ends in realization of loss and then mourning, which itself leads to a fury that damages the whole earth.

In the Demeter myth, especially in Ovid's interpretation in *Metamorphoses*, rape is conflated with death. Dis (Greek Hades) finds the innocent and beautiful Proserpine picking flowers in a field and abducts her by force to the underworld. This action outrages both Proserpine's mother Ceres (Gr. Demeter), and the water nymph Cyane who cannot tolerate the violence of Dis's action (Bk. V:385-424). The "inconsolable grief" that she keeps in her "silent heart" causes Cyane to melt away in sorrow—her tears ultimately transforming her into the water she inhabits (V:425-486). By contrast, though she matches Cyane's grief, in her sorrow over her daughter's rape and seizure to the underworld, Ceres also matches Dis's violence.

In response to news of Proserpine's rape, Ovid's Ceres tears her hair and beats her breast. With "cruel hands" she turns to the earth as the receptacle of her wrath, breaking the ploughs, and causing destruction to farmers, cattle, and the land (V:425-486). The consequences of her emotions pervade the earth as she brings death and destruction. Because of the damage caused by her violent emotion, the goddess is repeatedly asked to mitigate both her fury and her grief. Homer's Helios begs the furious Demeter, "But I urge you, goddess: stop your loud cry of lamentation: you should not/ have an anger

without bounds, all in vain. It is not unseemly/ to have, of all the immortals, such a son-in-law as Hades” (Homer 81-83), to which Rhea later assents, “so come, my child! Obey! Do not be too/ stubborn in your anger at the dark-clouded son of Kronos. / Straightaway make the harvest grow, that life-bringer for humans” (467-469). Ovid’s gods repeat this urging. Against the grief of Cyane, Ovid presents the water nymph Arethusa who sides with Helios and advises, “O great goddess of the crops, mother of that virgin sought through all the earth, end your fruitless efforts, and do not anger yourself so deeply against the faithful land” (Ovid V: 487-532). Arethusa adds that she saw Proserpine crying in hades. “Nevertheless,” she urges, Ceres (Demeter) must remember that her daughter is now the consort of the powerful king of hell. Thus the gods ask her to be reasonable, but Demeter seems to believe that the correct response to the violence of separation is violence of her own, and she will not be soothed until reunited with her daughter.

In the midst of her mounting fury, Demeter takes a journey in which she searches tirelessly for her lost daughter. Her fury mounts as she discovers Zeus’ complicity in Hades’ action. Ultimately, Zeus strikes a compromise with her. But in spite of her eternally temporal reunion with her child, the adamant gate holds fast, and Demeter cannot ever follow her daughter into hades in her yearly returns to that domain. Demeter rejects all the efforts of those around her that push her toward acceptance of this separation. The words of the mortal Metaneira contrast with Demeter’s response: “We humans endure the gifts the gods give us, even when we are grieving over what has to be. / The yoke has been placed on our neck” (Homer 216-217). Demeter refuses to recognize

her position as powerless, nor is her compassion aroused when the danger of her mourning is pointed out to her.

By contrast, the image of Mary, the mother of Jesus in Christian narratives, represents quiet compassion in the face of maternal loss. She rejects rage in her sorrow, internalizes suffering and loss, and reforms sorrow into empathy. Her eternal benevolence places her in the position of the comforter of the sorrows of the world. Within this image resides a belief in the possibility of “consolation and a life of Grace amid our very sorrows” (*Akathist to the Mother of God, Joy of All Who Sorrow*, Ikos 2).³⁶ Suffering and those who suffer possess a singular role as they become the center of a newly-ordered universe—both symbolically and in idealized actuality.

The authors of the passion gospels present both female-gendered and male-gendered grief as they report the presence of women and the absence of men at the death and burial of Jesus. Joseph of Arimathea has the authority to ask for Jesus’s body and to wrap it in a clean cloth as preparation for burial, but it is the women who plan to anoint the body (Luke 24). They watch as the body is put in the tomb and then wait for the appropriate time to perform their desired duty. Key to these representations of trauma response, Mary stays near to the cross while others wait “at a distance,” and she holds watch at both the trial and the tomb.³⁷ In this context, Mary’s power is located at least partly within her female-gendered grief response in that she remains vigilant and thus suffers alongside her son. The gospel writers present mourning that is not dangerous, violent, or even vocal. Most importantly, in spite of her transcendent knowledge of her

³⁶ Attributed to St. Romanos the Melodist of Constantinople (d. 556), oca.org and joyofallwhosorrow.org.uk.

³⁷ Luke 23-24 and Matthew 27ff, and explicated by seventh-century theologian Maximos the Confessor in the *Evangelion of James*, for example, among many others.

son's resurrection in this story, Mary's long lasting (i.e., eternal) grief response to her son's death becomes strikingly powerful since within the memory of this loss resides her ability to share in the grief of others, making her, consequently, "the mother of all" (*Akathist to the Mother of God*, Ikos 4).

Pictorial representations of the Mother of God often show her holding the crucified (and dead) son or the living infant son whose head, nevertheless, leans back to replicate the position of a slaughtered lamb. She is sometimes pictured bereft of an image of the Christ. In these cases, she can be seen knitting a veil for the Jewish temple, a skein of yarn standing in for the body of Christ and acknowledging her position as mother. In some icons and statues, she holds her hands together in the traditional Western Christian prayer position or holds her hands outspread, arms open at her side. Both of these bereaved positionings indicate her compassionate prayer on behalf of the suffering world. Meanwhile, in the theological writings of the church, like Demeter Mary is life-giving: "In me the blades of corn sprout forth" she says, and others agree, "Mary was like the blade of corn and our Lord Jesus shown forth from her" (St. Ephrem the Syrian, qtd. in Rubin 39). She is the ideal Christian example who acts as a compassionate, nurturing, and protective companion (Rubin 42; *Akathist to the Mother of God*, Kontakion 5). The post-reformation church generally ignores this example in mourning, since under the influence of rational humanism, theologians pushed for a return to the slim biblical accounts relating to the virgin, and excised traditions and stories relating to her within oral narratives and writings they deemed apocryphal (Rubin 367, 375). However, writers and poets continued to engage this picture of mourning.

The images of Demeter and Mary repeatedly appear in poems and stories that confront a mother's response to her child's death. These two central icons interact with three key aspects writers regularly notice in maternal grief: forced silence, rebellious fury, and compassionate memory.

Silence: The Dangerous Internalization of Transformative Suffering

[They] behaved as though what had happened was finished, as though some ordinary event had taken place and come to an end in a natural way . . . that nothing more would be said about [her dead son] . . . she alone must lie quiet and not speak of this knowledge she had now, the knowledge that made her afraid. It was the same knowledge they all had, of course, but they did not want it spoken of. (Maeve Brennan)

Mary Magdalene beat her breast and sobbed,
The beloved disciple turned to stone,
But where the silent Mother stood, there
No one glanced and no one would have dared. (Anna Ahkmatova)

Literature engaging maternal grief reveals pressure for silence in regard to the death of an infant or young child based on the other's negative reception of bereaved speech and the perceived danger of speech. Characters view speech as likely to increase pain or endanger the community. This desire to silence the mother reaches back to the story of Demeter, where the counsel and efforts of Arethusa, Helios, and others seek to mitigate Demeter's intense, destructive grief. The literature of maternal grief reflects this pressure to silence in two ways. First, the difficulty in accessing stories and poetry that engage the maternal experience after child death reveals external desires for its silencing. Second, through character interaction and narrative comment, stories that portray maternal grief record efforts to elide the mother's experience and silence her grief, and

sometimes even suggest the difficulty the author faces in writing about the topics of child loss and maternal grief. Novels, particularly, suggest that speaking of or hearing about the violent emotions related to the death of a child creates discomfort for others, partially because they fear the repercussions of these strong emotions.

Poet Ben Jonson (1572-1637) gives voice to the perceived danger of too-strong emotions, specifically of loving too much and too visibly. For him, intense love correlates with extreme vulnerability to loss and grief. In his famous sonnet, “On My First Son” (1616), he hides the experience of parental grief, and instead focuses on the dangers of attachment, writing, “My sin was too much hope of thee, loved boy!” (l. 2). And, in his grief at the child’s death, he vows to reduce his future love: “For whose sake, henceforth, all his vows be such/ As what he loves may never like too much” (ll. 11-12). This self-aware self-silencing attempts to forestall grief before it begins, and thus illuminates the motives of the similar practice of silencing too-intense grief itself. This poem suggests a protective motive for those who demand brief, controlled grief, as the works examined in this section will bear out. In this thematic assessment of imaginative work engaging maternal grief, Hannah W. Foster’s epistolary novel, *The Coquette* (1797) displays the use of, and suggests the meaning of, silencing the bereaved. This novel interacts with representations in George Eliot’s novel *Adam Bede* (1859) and Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (1987), where fear and manners limit speech and memory about the dead.

In *The Coquette* the author speaks obliquely about love, sex, childbirth, and death. Manners limit speech, and the novel illustrates that a desire for safety motivates silence in both bereaved mothers and authors. Hiding love through silence protects against both loss and against a too-intense, too-painful feeling of loss. The writers of the novel’s letters

hesitate to inscribe the indecent events of birth and death, deeply linked with mothers' dangerous, overweening love. Manners that restrain speech about death ultimately silence the illicit mother Eliza, the novel's central character who indulges in an affair with the rake Sanford. The writers of the novel's letters briefly and obliquely mention the deaths of several babies, but neither Eliza's pregnancy nor her sexual encounters are directly named by any of the characters. When Eliza writes to Mrs. Richman about the imminent birth of Mrs. Richman's child, she says, "I am anxious to hear of a wished for event and of your safety" (68). Later, Mr. Richmond writes to inform Eliza of that baby's birth: "I write a line, at Mrs. Richman's request, just to inform you, Eliza, that yesterday, that lovely and beloved woman presented me with a daughter." This language is more open, and yet "presented me with" moves quickly past the birth itself to the safe, living baby washed and dressed. When Sanford writes to a friend of his mistress Eliza's pregnancy, his meaning is clear, even while his language attempts to obscure it: "An unlucky, but not miraculous accident, has taken place, which must soon expose our amour" (140). He quickly follows this information with plain, callous language to describe his legitimate son's stillbirth: "My wife has been reduced very low, of late. She brought me a boy a few weeks past, a dead one though" (140). Yet, the "brought me" again elides the birth and death of the child, focusing on an inanimate object, disconnected from the life and body of the mother.

Perhaps Sanford can speak openly about the baby's death because he does not need the protection from suffering that oblique language seeks to provide: "These circumstances give me neither pain nor pleasure," he says (140). Such "circumstances" cannot commonly be named because they are either embarrassing or dangerous. By the

time Eliza gives birth to her own stillborn child, her experience is utterly un-inscribable for the author, and the experience remains untold. This mother does not write of the death of her infant within the epistolary form of the novel, but in a journal that is not produced for the reader. The baby itself is un-inscribable, even in the earth, for while Eliza's burial site bears description and even watering with strangers' tears (169), the grave of the "little stranger" remains unmentionable—and un-locatable.

Eliza and her child die, as she wished. "The little innocent I bear, "she laments, "will quickly disclose its mother's shame! God Almighty grant it may not live as a monument of my guilt . . . the greatest consolation I can have, will be to carry it with me to a state of eternal rest" (146).³⁸ Eliza's letters ended with her flight to the inn. Yet, this silence does not result from an inability to represent the birth and death of her child. In one of the final letters of the novel, Eliza's friend Julia Granby writes about "several scraps of her writing" that contained "miscellaneous reflections on her situation, the death of her babe, and the absence of her friends. Some of these were written before, some after her confinement . . . [testifying to the] calm expectation she entertained of her approaching dissolution" (162). With Eliza's death, the memory of the child is erased along with the writing that contained her reflections on this loss (162). In keeping with the form of the sentimental novel over which she presides, Eliza becomes speechless as, like Cyane, she dissolves into a pool of her own tears.

As for the author and her other characters, the death of the illicitly-formed mother is a happy accident that increases the ease of silencing the mother, while removing any

³⁸ Cf. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* where Eliza carries her son Harry during the first part of their escape from slavery and then across the dangerously melting ice of the Ohio River, referencing a crossing (out of Hades, of course, in this case) of the river Styx.

memory of her child. Just as Eliza dies, and with her any memory of her child, in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859), the faithless mother Hetty dies on her return trip from a forced exile in Australia, removing the need to further punish her for child-murder, or to ever mention the baby again, and Eliot does not. Hetty's exile results from her action of abandoning her illegitimate child under a bush, where the child died. And Hetty's death becomes the natural outcome of this violent rejection of maternal duty, conveniently silencing potential grief and memory. However, the author also signals that the normality disrupted by the death of the child cannot be regained—either for the mother Hetty or for any of those connected to her, since no character returns to a former balance or perspective. Instead, Eliot highlights the new awareness and changed perspective resulting from suffering. Significantly, in Hetty's death on her return trip from Australia, Eliot signals the impossibility of return in any sense for Hetty, even physical return to her home country.

Like Hetty's, Eliza's illicit pregnancy, along with her subsequent escape and bereavement, represents an inability to accept the cultural demand of motherhood, which requires the sacrifice of any self-interest to the group interest, the action which defines motherhood-in-culture. In this view, the child's death is a consequence of the mother's rejection of proper manners. But by creating a plot in which all those positioned as children die, Foster subversively reveals the limitations of the hope that manners provide safety from suffering and death. Mrs. Richman's daughter Harriot is born to the ideal mother, one aware of the "important charge which she has received" (69). This mother runs her nursery well, places her duty within the household, and by her own account centers all her happiness in the home domain (97). When Mrs. Richman's infant daughter

dies, Eliza gives traditional solace, writing that death in infancy saves the child from “tasting the bitterness of woe” at a later stage of life and saves her mother from watching this suffering (134). Indeed, this language foreshadows Mrs. Wharton’s experience of Eliza’s downfall. Yet, in spite of this vocalized hope of protection against “bitterness and woe,” both of these deaths point out that the woman who embraces proper manners and seeks her due position in society remains in danger, for her power rests in her absolutely vulnerable ability to produce and keep children. In the novel, women’s silence does not obtain this power. Indeed, Foster signals that this power cannot be bought with virtue, nor does it rest safely within submission to the patriarchal social will. For Foster, repressing the possibility of death or the maternal response to grief serves no restorative purpose.

Yet, the author gives manners the final word, as Eliza’s suffering disappears in silence, her witness as bereaved mother is erased, and no one retains the memory of the dead child (who can conveniently be viewed as never having lived, since it was born dead). In the mode of the water nymph Cyane, Eliza does not lastingly inscribe the disappearance of her child, even though she witnesses it. She submits to silence, but refuses to return to normal life after the child’s death—in spite of others’ hope she might. Her own death signals her refusal to give up the dead child, but also saves the community and the reader from the memory of the child.

Toni Morrison voices this same fear of memory and maternal emotion in *Beloved* (1987), as the community angrily judges the bereaved mother Sethe for the pride of loving too deeply and, thereby, inviting pain for all. Following the American Civil War, former slave Sethe lives with traumatic memories of life on the plantation Sweet Home, her perilous escape, and the brutal death of her young daughter, who she murdered to

save her from returning to slavery. When Paul D., another former slave from Sweet Home, arrives and exorcises the daughter's ghost, a mysterious young woman who calls herself Beloved appears. These characters live in both the past and the present, and, while memory freely mixes with present awareness, attachment to memory isolates Sethe. The community views her excessive love and vigilant memory as dangerous. Morrison heightens the experience of loss through the mother's act of murder, and thereby exposes the extreme maternal response to the death of a child. Further, she underpins Sethe's anguish with the utter insanity of maternal—or any—love in the face of the intense danger of suffering and grief. In this context, Sethe's wrongdoing, in the eyes of her community, lies not in her guilt in murdering her child, but in loving the child too much, of attaching in a violent world precariously perched over a great void of emptiness.

Many characters in the novel present love as dangerous. Paul D. asserts that he must protect himself by loving small (191). Janey Wagon judges intense love as selfish and prideful, pronouncing that Sethe “lost her wits . . . trying to do it all alone with her nose in the air” (199). In another interaction that more explicitly points out the danger of love, Ella responds to Sethe's question about whether her newly born child will live: examining “the tiny, dirty face poking out of the wool blanket,” Ella says, “hard to say . . . if anybody was to ask me I'd say, ‘Don't love nothing’” (108). Sethe ignores this warning here and elsewhere, pointing out repeatedly that, against all odds, she has enough milk for her baby. This continual referral to her milk affirms the sufficiency of her vigilant motherhood to save her children. But her community responds that loving this freely is an arrogance that only invites suffering in the living death of slavery. Explaining the child Beloved's death to Paul D, Sethe says,

I did it. I got us all out . . . We was here. Each and everyone of my babies and me too. I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn't no accident. I did that. . . It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good. Good and right. I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was *that* wide. Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon—there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to. You know what I mean? (190-191)

Because Sethe ignores the warning about the risk posed by too-intense emotions, the community judges her for pride, just as they judged her mother-in-law Baby Suggs. After a big shared meal set off by a gift of blackberries, Baby Suggs felt the community's disapproval: "Her friends and neighbors were angry at her because she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess" (163). Later, she seems to agree with their judgment, thinking "and it worked out, worked out just fine, until she got proud and let herself be overwhelmed by the sight of her daughter-in-law and Halle's children . . . and have a celebration of blackberries that put Christmas to shame. Now she stood in the garden smelling disapproval, feeling a dark and coming thing" (173). This perspective reveals that the judgment against pride is really against love: Baby Suggs is proud because she lets the feeling of love overpower her. Sethe's thick love and Baby Suggs' big heart draw attention by their emotive loudness, and this attention leads to suffering. In spite of the importance of memory and defiant attachment in the novel, Sethe survives only by restraining maternal love, since under the influence of Freud's belief in the need to limit love through the processes of closure, acceptance, and, finally, the killing of the dead, Morrison has the community "killing" Beloved through her (apparently willing) departure at the end of the novel.

By contrast, regarding Sethe's pain, the white girl she meets while escaping, and who attends the birth of Denver, advises her, in words that harken to Harriet Beecher Stowe's belief in the sanctification of love, "good for you. More it hurt more better it is. Can't nothing heal without pain, you know" (92). But, while grief and memory must be engaged, Morrison's characters ultimately reject their lasting claim. Baby Suggs' sermon in the clearing on the virtues of self-love and compassion ends with mutual tears, which echo the many tears in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: "Finally she called the women to her. 'Cry,' she told them. 'For the living and the dead. Just cry.' And without covering their eyes the women let loose" (103). Yet, these tears are meant to end, and *deus ex machina*, the dead Beloved decides to leave. In this process, Morrison's characters deny the ability of language to fully represent their loss (singing is better specifically because it breaks the back of words, 308). And while, in light of Morrison's conception of rememory, critic Lori Askland argues that Sethe's home becomes a place where painful stories can be shared, not kept to oneself, and made bearable in the speaking (802), Morrison insists that some stories are not meant to be told: "It was not a story to pass on" (322, 323). Indeed, "remembering seemed unwise . . . so they forgot her" (323). Morrison suggests memory, language, and even love are available only to those in positions of wellness and power. Thus the message of connection is itself a "shield and a sword" (303). The women join together to save Denver and Sethe by singing the memory away, quieting the "voices" (307, 311). Again, Morrison values Freud's un-attaching and dis-association. The image of the ever-grieving Mary, contained in the milk-giver Sethe, must be vanquished beneath the pressure to forget loss and reject guilt, since remembering makes Sethe a slave to Beloved, creating a Hades in her house. And

although Sethe resembles the defiant and destructive Demeter, the movement toward this violent behavior must be given up along with the dead child. Ultimately, Beloved must return across the river to free the household. While Beloved's presence forced Sethe to remember her past and herself, a process of integration necessary to her ability to love others, this action replicates Freud's idea. Thus, as Freud believed, and as perpetuated in the APA's definition of Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder, only by sorting through memories and then forgetting the dead do survivors regain the ability to create new attachments, i.e., love others. If Sethe remembers Beloved, it is a memory properly integrated with her sense of self, the ghost now quiet.

Like Foster's *The Coquette*, Morrison's novel gives way to an external pressure to let go of the past and its dead. Morrison speaks the unspeakable, and her characters remember the unbearable and account for the "disremembered." But the final word is forgetfulness. Nevertheless, only a community of sympathetic and powerful women permits this healing action, and it only occurs after they see (or witness) Beloved themselves. Led by Janey Wagon and Ella, they approach Sethe's grief and memory. And in spite of the insistence that some pain is too great to speak or remember, the novel participates in both of these actions.

As in the literary representation of grief in Morrison and in Foster's account of the bereaved Eliza, recent developments in trauma theory emphasize the other's discomfort at hearing as a motivation for silence (Pederson 337-338, 342-343). In this view, listener discomfort creates internal pressure for silence because of the possible reception of grief-stricken speech and the perceived danger of such speech. The mother herself learns to fear others' response to her expressed grief, especially the possibility of the hearer's

power to question the validity of her grief. The listener must repress speech for his own comfort, and the community creates manners to control speech by constructing definitions of appropriate grief and delineating acceptable behavior during mourning. Manners consequently function as a protective device motivated by the desire to limit suffering for self, other, and community. Yet not all mothers submit to this pressure.

Fury, Madness, Uproar

In other stories and poetry, mothers reject submission to silence, sometimes with extreme violence, and authors link the appearance of closure to internal destruction. Both Homer and Ovid mark the responses of Demeter, the ancient image for fury in grief, by wildness and flight, and later authors reproduce this action of mental, physical, or spiritual flight, often portrayed as escape. This violent fury is linked to the vulnerability or powerlessness of the bereaved. While other characters may define maternal fury as madness, the bereaved mother recognizes her response as normative and sane. In addition, fury may be witnessed as a criminal grief that creates agents who lose control of their behavior and morality. In connection with the loss of control over behavior or morality, fury explodes into violence. This violence can also be seen as an intentional effort to speak when outside pressures force closure and its attendant silence. Mothers who react with violence reverse the usual gendered order by employing a way to speak that challenges conventional ideas about women's conduct, since violence is typically gendered masculine while peace-making is gendered feminine. In this essay, Fanny Fern's novel *Ruth Hall* (1855) provides the central witness to this fury, while others self-

consciously subvert this image, including William Shakespeare in *The Winter's Tale* (1623) and Alfred Lord Tennyson in "Demeter and Persephone" (1889).

Fanny Fern invokes the image of Demeter when her eponymous character Ruth Hall reacts with speaking-violence to the childhood death of her daughter Daisy. Daisy's purity, innocence, and love of nature mark her from the start as a vulnerable Persephone figure. The young Daisy spends her time outside, often playing in the meadow, and the author describes an interaction reminiscent of innocent and vulnerable Persephone in her field of flowers: "Settling her little elbows on her knees, [Daisy] sat with her chin in her palms dreamily watching the shifting clouds. A butterfly alights on a blade of grass near her: Daisy springs up, her long hair floating like a veil about her shoulders, and her tiny feet scarce bending the clover blossoms, and tiptoes carefully along in pursuit" (37). Instead of catching the butterfly, Daisy finds a yellow caterpillar, which she allows to crawl up her arm again and again. Ruth protests, but Daisy affirms love for all creatures saying, "why—*God* made him" (37). This inspires a feeling of awe in Ruth, and her servant Dinah later says, "Oh, Lor! Dis nigger knew she wouldn't live, ever since she said dat /bout de caterpillar. De Lord wants de chil', dat's a fac'; she nebber played enough to suit Dinah" (43). Daisy's innocence and spiritual perfection is further revealed in her death, where the child's silence and calm in the face of suffering lead to Ruth's vision of Daisy as a saint. As Ruth sits with her dying child, she observes the way light falls on Daisy's head to provide her with the radiant crown of a halo. As the sun comes up, one beam penetrates the window, "hovering like a halo over Daisy's sunny head," and she dies: "A quick, convulsive start, and with one wild cry 'as the little throat filled to suffocation; the fair white arms were tossed aloft, then dropped powerless upon the

bed of Death!” (45). Death’s presence in this pure, haloed, sunny girl with fair white arms is meant to instill a sense of offense in the reader. Hades brutally intrudes where he is most unwelcome and ill-suited.

Meanwhile, like Dinah’s compassionless, jealous god who demands the innocent Daisy for himself, Ruth’s father-in-law echoes Zeus by his emotional detachment and implicit participation in the child’s death. From his position of power and knowledge as a doctor, Ruth’s father-in-law refuses to help Daisy until she is too ill to be helped. Further, his position of power grants him the ability to judge the mother’s grief response. He does not believe in the validity of the avoidance of a location of painful memory, and judges Ruth for allowing her husband to sell the farm where Daisy died: “[I] have no patience with any woman who’d let a husband sell a farm at such a sacrifice as Harry’s was sold, merely because there was a remote chance she would become insane if she staid [sic] there . . . Well, well; they’ll both go to the dogs, that’s the amount of it” (47). He even imagines that she willfully exacerbates her sorrow, saying in Ruth’s hearing, “fashion to be sentimental; nerves a modern invention. Ridiculous!” and arguing that his detachment is the ideal (47). Meanwhile, Ruth’s mother-in-law replicates Homer’s and Ovid’s gods’ and goddesses’ responses to human sorrow, saying, “Ruth is one of the uneasy kind; it’s coming and going—coming and going with her. She fancied everything indoors and out reminded her of Daisy, and kept wandering round, trying to be rid of herself. Now that proves she didn’t make a sanctifying use of her trouble. It’s no use trying to dodge what the Lord sends. We’ve just got to stand and take it” (47). This language echoes the explanation Metaneira gives to Demeter that in their grief, humans must simply “endure” what the gods send, since “the yoke has been placed on our neck” (Homer 216, 217).

Indeed, the doctor and his wife continue to present a challenge to Ruth's grief, and she responds with Demeter's fury. This rage expresses itself through angry speech, or writing, which includes the destructive denunciation of her in-laws and her own family. Ruth's writing constitutes a violent response to her husband's and daughter's deaths, and to the constant possibility of the deaths of (or forcible separation from) her two living daughters. Interestingly, she engages the reader's sympathy in order to prove her right to this furious speech. The allusions to the myth of Persephone help the author present loss of and grief for an innocent daughter as both a typical and representative maternal experience. Thus, the experience of her young daughter's death cements the validity of Ruth's motherhood and the legitimacy of her writing, especially because this writing protects and provides for her two living daughters, both of whom are now sought by Hades in the forms of Dr. and Mrs. Hall. For Fanny Fern, motherhood is defined by this right to fury, including the right to speech as a path to reprisal. This action views silence as non-protective, and speaking as productive. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's view that Fern "writes as if the Devil was in her," and his belief women write well only "when they throw off the restraints of decency" further confirms her belief that she must justify her speech (79).

Ruth Hall's fury emanates from her vulnerability. This connection extends to the mother she hears crying in the insane asylum, a place Fanny Fern imagines as a physical restraint for the woman who speaks too loudly. Here Ruth hears the wild cries of a mother whose child has been forcibly taken from her. As Ruth and her daughter Katy descend to the basement of the hospital on their way to see the dead Mrs. Leon, they hear the cries of this unmanageable bereaved mother. "Hark!" says Ruth, "what's that?" (111).

“Nothing,” their guide responds, “only a crazy woman in that room yonder, screaming for her child. Her husband ran away from her and carried off her child with him, to spite her, and now she fancies every footstep she hears is his. Visitors always thinks she screams awful. She can’t harm you . . . for she is chained. . . . She’s a sight of trouble to manage. If she was to catch sight of your little girl out there in the garden, she’d spring at her through them bars like a panther, but we don’t have to whip her *very* often” (111, italics original). The pathos provided by this woman who has been separated from her child comes from her extreme powerlessness and vulnerability. Others view her emotions as extremely dangerous, suggesting that one way she might mete out her violence is by abducting another woman’s child. Yet, she has no recourse toward her estranged husband or the orderlies that attempt to restrain her wild behavior. Likewise, other characters in the novel label Ruth’s grief as dangerous while they label her furious move toward independence as unfeminine. The author, however, seeks to prove Ruth’s femininity and relatability through her intense and continued grief witnessed in her lasting maternal memory. For example, Ruth’s attachment to Daisy’s possessions may be considered too intense or pathological, but if so, it is clearly an expected and revered feminine pathology. As Ruth holds Daisy’s “little half-worn shoe” upon the memorial of “eight years since the little Daisy withered,” (49) Fern explains

The first born! Oh, other tiny feet may trip lightly at the hearth-stone, other rosy faces may greet us round the board; with tender love we soothe their childish pains and share their childish sports; but “Benjamin is not,” is written in the secret chamber of many a bereaved mother’s heart, where never more the echo of a childish voice may ring out such liquid music as death hath hushed. (48)³⁹

³⁹ Reference to Genesis 42. “Benjamin is not” alludes to the story of Jacob’s loss of his children Joseph and Simeon, and his fear of losing his favorite son Benjamin: “And Jacob their father said unto them, Me have ye bereaved of my children: Joseph is not, and Simeon is not, and ye will take Benjamin away: all these things are against me. And Reuben spake unto his father, saying, Slay my two sons, if I bring him not to

Fern idealizes this intense and lasting grief that participates in the extended grief of Demeter. Ruth's pronounced and continued grief serves to produce and justify the anti-feminine actions of speaking and publishing, which ultimately result in what her readers might view as an unfeminine self-sufficiency.

While subverting the image of the violent Demeter, like Fern Shakespeare idealizes intense, long-term grief. He connects the lost daughter Perdita in *The Winter's Tale* to Persephone. Apart from the similarity of the name Perdita to Persephone and Proserpina, Perdita's name means "the lost one" in Latin. The virtuous Hermione's missing daughter, whose own father hands her over to death, appears later in the play as a beautiful young maiden presiding over a harvest feast and summoning Persephone. Perdita's reference to the wife of Hades, her activity in gathering and sharing flowers, her innocence, and her vulnerable position all link her to Persephone. "O Proserpina," she says,

For the flowers now that, frightened, thou let'st fall
From Dis's wagon! Daffodils,
That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty (4.4.138-43)

Her mention of the new-gathered daffodils point to the upending of the Demeter story in Shakespeare's resurrection play. Yet, even with the absent child's recovery in sight, this story about the loss of two young children via their father's jealousy treats extreme maternal grief as expected. When Paulina reports that Hermione has died at the news of her son's death, the King Leontes readily believes it. Similarly, Paulina's husband

thee: deliver him into my hand, and I will bring him to thee again. And he said, My son shall not go down with you; for his brother is dead, and he is left alone: if mischief befall him by the way in the which ye go, then shall ye bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave."

Antigonus dreams of the anguished, weeping Hermione, whom he believes to be dead through grief. Indeed, Shakespeare criticizes a controlled response to death through the ironic language of Paulina as she impresses upon Leontes his guilt and deserved suffering:

I do repent. Alas, I have showed too much
The rashness of a woman. He is touched
To th' noble heart.- What's gone and what's past help
Should be past grief. Do not receive affliction
At my petition. I beseech you, rather
Let me be punished, that have minded you
Of what you should forget. Now, good my liege,
Sir, royal sir, forgive a foolish woman
The love I bore your queen—lo, fool again!—
I'll speak of her no more, nor of your children.
I'll not remember you of my own lord,
Who is lost too. (3.3.244-56)

But she concludes with the honest, “take your patience to you, / And I'll say nothing,” marking value in his potential capacity to endure suffering. Along with the audience, Paulina ultimately approves Leontes' redemptive sixteen-years mourning on behalf of his wife and two children (3.3.256-7; 5.1, 3). Indeed, Hermione, like Demeter, waits in eternal, lifeless winter until the spring return of her daughter Perdita from a far country. Yet, Hermione's mildness, obedience, and humility also mark her as a Mary figure. Thus, Shakespeare subverts the angry Demeter into the gentle and silent Hermione, not so much in flight as frozen--herself excluded from life, not angrily withholding it from her community.

Likewise, while focusing on the intensity of her grief, Tennyson self-consciously Marionizes Demeter in his poem “Demeter and Persephone,” creating a goddess who looks with compassion on the suffering of men. Her extreme disorientation in grief, not her fury, causes the “golden grain” to rot and die (ll. 107, 109-110). This mother is

herself utterly lost, even while her mighty “childless cry” rings powerfully through Hades, Earth, and Heaven (ll. 32-33). Her endless search for Persephone gives this version of Demeter compassion as she grieves for man “thro’ all my grief for thee” (l. 74). In Tennyson, a loving and healing Demeter reports that she traveled

Thro’ many a palace, many a cot, and gave
Thy breast to ailing infants in the night
And set the mother waking in amaze
To find her sick one whole (ll. 55-58)

Even with her daughter back in her arms, Demeter’s “deathless heart of motherhood” fears Persephone’s return to Hades (ll. 41ff). And after witnessing the great suffering on earth, her reunion with her daughter leaves her “ill-content,” judging the gods, and waiting for “younger kindlier Gods to bear [them] down” (ll. 126, 129). Thus, this more sympathetic Demeter also resembles the Christian Mary in her lasting grief and in her expectation of the triumph of love over fear (ll. 136-47).

The proclivity to subsume the pagan Demeter in the Christian Mary in literary portrayals of child loss points to a lasting discomfort with women’s violent emotion and action. Thus, artists move grief into the more socially acceptable translating of one’s suffering into sympathy for others. However, writers maintain a tension in this use and assessment. They puzzle over the way mothers protect their grief from outside forces, and vividly express astonishment in the paradox of a grief that is both dangerous and salvific. Writers continue to highlight the unsettled and unsettling nature of maternal grief, even when they figure compassion as a safer, more feminine response.

Speaking, Hearing, Touching Death: Translation of (the) Suffering

with his kind mother
who partakes thy woe (John Donne)

Glad to see us go we give them such trouble coming. Job seems to suit them.
Huggermugger in corners. Slop about in slipperslappers for fear he'd wake.
Then getting it ready. Laying it out. Molly and Mrs. Fleming making the
bed. Pull it more to your side. Our windingsheet. Never know who will
touch you dead. Wash and shampoo. I believe they clip the nails and the
hair. Keep a bit in an envelope. Grows all the same after. Unclean job.
(James Joyce)

Fyodor Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879-80) and James Joyce in *Ulysses* (1922) represent unsettled, salvific grief, of which the central example in this essay is Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and which is both extended and refuted by Emily Dickinson, who complicates Stowe's portrayal of the benefit of grief as determined action on behalf of the other.

In a novel about searching for a lost son, Joyce's character Leopold Bloom remembers his wife Molly's protection—or exclusion—of him from the process of preparing his infant son Rudy's body for burial. Molly was in close physical contact with the dead child, and he even suspects she has secretly (“huggermugger”) taken mementos from the body of the baby. This feminine focus on the dead body highlights the physicality of women's interaction with the dead. Critic Sandra Gilbert writes about this perceived “transgressive communion” with the dead as a “mysteriously privileged access to the other world” that feminine grief seems to bestow (34, 30). Along with Joyce, she genders female the corporeal practices of “direct physical contact, touching and caressing the hair or head of the corpse or holding the forehead” (Holst-Warhaft, quoted in Gilbert 33). Gilbert links female affinity with death to women's progenic faculties. “Perhaps

onlookers shiver,” Gilbert writes about spectators of female grief, “at the widow’s uncanny access to the other world in the same way that culture shudders, more generally, at woman’s potency as if the power to give birth must be matched by an equal power to take back the gift of life” (36). Similarly, Joyce suggests that the unclean job of caring for the dead body suits women since they are also responsible for the body’s physical entry into the world, another unclean process from which men are excluded. Joyce has earlier described Bloom’s feeling of pity as the feminine compassion that extends to “all things dying . . . all things born. Poor Mrs. Purefoy. Hope she’s over. Because their wombs” (234). Bloom ties maternity to a closeness with death. He himself embodies open-ended, ardent, and disruptive feminine grief, and his explanation, “because their wombs,” links compassion to the experience of child birth, which he has already linked to an affinity with the dead.

Joyce invokes the classic image of the Catholic virgin Mary, which he refers to at least fifty times in *Ulysses*, through the continued maternal presence as death arrives and the care of the dead begins.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, Molly’s stationary presence at the death and in the novel juxtaposes Bloom’s journey through Dublin, searching for the lost child, sometimes figured as Rudy, sometimes as Shakespeare’s Perdita, and sometimes as Stephen Dedalus/Telemachus. Thus, in Bloom’s female-gendered grief, Joyce recasts the wandering of Odysseus into Demeter’s search for the lost child. However, like Tennyson’s Marionized Demeter, Bloom, though ostensibly figured as Odysseus, lacks any heroic quality outside of his wide-ranging compassion. In the dizzying layers of meaning in Joyce’s novel, Bloom’s feminine compassion causes him to continually

⁴⁰ Reference for “Mary, Blessed Virgin” and “Litany of Our Lady” in Don Gifford and Roberg J. Seidman’s *Ulysses Annotated*.

recognize the grief and suffering of others, and this compassion depends on his own grief and the recurring memories of his son Rudy. In addition, long-lasting grief links Bloom to his wife Molly, and the search for the lost child creates the possibility of Bloom's return to his wife.

Fifty years before Joyce's *Ulysses*, unsettled, long-lasting grief also motivated the searching journey of the bereaved mother Nastasia in Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). He frames this journey as a pilgrimage, facilitated by Nastasia's ability to maintain connection to the dead. In the chapter "Women of Faith," the Monk-Priest Zosima interacts with female pilgrims who visit him, all of whom are bearing some extreme form of grief. The pilgrim Nastasia tells the Elder Zosima of her intense grieving in response to the death of her baby. Nastasia defiantly maintains a passionate remembrance of her child, a disconnection from her husband and community, and a refusal of any consolation. Like Dostoevsky's other bereaved characters, she recognizes her inability to return to her former emotional state, and she maintains a connection to the beloved dead. Dostoevsky presents two responses to loss:

There is among the people a silent, long-suffering grief; it withdraws into itself and is silent. But there is also a grief that is strained; a moment comes when it breaks through with tears, and from that moment on it pours itself out in lamentations. Especially with women. But it is no easier to bear than the silent grief. Lamentations ease the heart only by straining and exacerbating it more and more. Such grief does not even want consolation; it is nourished by the sense of its unquenchableness. Lamentations are simply the need to constantly irritate the wound. (48)

He does not privilege either silent or lamenting grief, but allows the woman to speak: "I've come to see you, father . . . I buried my baby son, and went on pilgrimage" (48). Zosima asks her why she is weeping, and she replies that she mourns for her little son, Alexie, and describes her visions of Alexie and intense feelings for the physical items

that formerly touched his living body. She also reiterates her disconnection from her husband and community:

he was the last little son left to us, we had four, Nikitushka and I, but our children didn't stay with us . . . this last one I buried and I can't forget him. As if he's just standing right in front of me and won't go away. My soul is wasted over him. I look at his clothes . . . I lay out all that he left behind, all his things, and look at them and howl . . . it's been three months since I left [my husband]. I've forgotten everything, and I don't want to remember . . . I'm through with everybody. (48-49)

The spiritual father first attempts to comfort her by words that have the authority of coming from a great saint, "rejoice, and do not weep. Your infant, too, now abides with the Lord in the host of his angels," adding that her child is praying for her in heaven (49). This first response affirms her continued connection to her son, but also asks her to move past her grief. She explains that her husband gave her the same advice, but that she cannot accept it. She discloses an intense desire to be reunited with her son, if only for a few moments. As she weeps, Elder Zosima gives a second answer:

This is Rachel of old 'weeping for her children, and she would not be comforted, because they are not.' This is the lot that befalls you, mothers, on earth. And do not be comforted, you should not be comforted, do not be comforted, but weep. Only each time you weep, do not fail to remember that your little son is one of God's angels, that he looks down at you from there and sees you, and rejoices in your tears and points them out to the Lord God. And you will be filled with this great mother's weeping for a long time, but in the end it will turn into quiet joy for you, and your bitter tears will become tears of quiet tenderness and the heart's purification, which saves from sin. (50)

Here the elder does not try to control Nastasia's grief, but connects her mourning to her pilgrimage, which like all pilgrimages seeks an end different from its beginning. For all of the women in this chapter, the elder confirms a spiritual meaning in their suffering, which he makes clear, saying, "If you love, you already belong to God. With love everything is bought, everything is saved . . . Go and do not be afraid" (52). This

affirmation provides contrast to Ivan Karamazov's loss of faith, which critic Donald Palumbo ascribes to Ivan's conviction that "the sufferings of humanity, and particularly of children, are meaningless, absurd, and unjust" (47). Ivan's position on suffering, which focuses on the unjust deaths of children, is spelled out in the central and most famous chapter in the novel, "The Grand Inquisitor." Ivan's "poem" of an encounter between Jesus and a cardinal who longs to end the general suffering of mankind, and especially the "babes," is precipitated by Ivan's contemplation of the reality of the suffering and deaths of children. The Grand Inquisitor ultimately condemns Christ to a second death, counting him guilty for bestowing a freedom that allows sorrow and mortality. Here, the rationalist Ivan rejects the value of co-suffering in intense love, and holds that kindness demands a hope, instead, in the general happiness of mankind. Ivan explains that on the day of judgement, the Grand Inquisitor will "stand up and point out to [Jesus] the thousands of millions of happy babes" that are happy because he has protected them from the misery of a freedom they cannot handle (259-60). The end of the chapter suggests that the only way to fight this rationalistic view of suffering is a simple kiss (262, 263) epitomized by memory: "If I hold out for the sticky little leaves," Ivan finally says to his brother Alyosha, "I shall love them only remembering you" (263). These "sticky little leaves" refer to a line of Schiller's where they signal rebirth, hope, human love, and natural beauty (Wood para. 4). Thus, even the rationalist Ivan recognizes that there is simply no response to suffering apart from memory and love.

Indeed, the novel is full of references to the idea of memory as salvific. Scholar and translator Richard Pevear points out that memory is a central theme of Zosima's talks and homilies (which are written down by Alyosha by memory after the elder's death),

and the final “saving word” Alyosha hopes to pass on to the schoolboys before whom he memorializes the child Ilyusha (Pevear xvii, Dostoyevsky 774-76). Meanwhile, the elder’s memory of his deceased brother inspires contemplation and active love. Zosima says in regard to memories of his dead brother, “I was young, a child, but it all remained indelibly in my heart, the feeling was hidden there. It all had to rise up and respond in due time. And so it did” (290). Meanwhile, Nastasia’s open-ended sorrow, which is based on her continued memory and love for the dead, ultimately salvages her connection to both her son and her husband. Such ideology coincides with Joyce’s similar premise that feminine compassion “for all things dying, for all things born” is the context in which suffering connects us and resistance to despair occurs.

Among other signals of complicated grief, Dostoevsky’s and Joyce’s characters possess an intense and lasting yearning for their dead children and an obsession with mementos saved from them, two characteristics assessed as dangerous by the DSM-5. In addition, Dostoevsky and Joyce employ a journey metaphor, but leave return in question. Meanwhile, neither *The Brothers Karamazov* nor *Ulysses* ends in satisfying closure. By contrast, the APA’s chosen journey metaphor, that of a simple return to previous beliefs, neglects the reality that the deaths of infants and children are a deeply troubling theological and philosophical problem. Mothers deserve the freedom to contemplate these painful questions, as well as the right to a lasting fury at their loss and a long-term emotional connection to the dead. This view fits with the experiences of parents interviewed by psychologist and author Paul C. Rosenblatt in *Parent Grief: Narratives of Loss and Relationship*. This book reproduces extensive accounts of what bereaved parents have said regarding the deaths of their children. Rosenblatt argues against efforts

to stop a grieving parent from talking about the discomfiting emotions related to guilt and blame, intense anger, or even suicide in relation to the parent's loss of a child, since these are all metaphors used to explain "how much has been lost and how strong the feelings of grief are, so to persuade the parent otherwise would diminish the child who died, the loss, and the grief" (87-88).

Repression of speech and feeling serve no healing purpose, but lasting memory allows continued connection to the child and others. Connection requires a recognition of the shared vulnerability of humanity and of our personal and collective limitation. Harriet Beecher Stowe employs just such a commitment to memory and contemplation in her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin or, Life Among the Lowly*, which considers the meaning and consequence of child death in the experience of the mother, and then presents potential responses to this kind of loss.

Chapter 2: Harriet Beecher Stowe: Maternal Memory as (Com)passionate Action

Fathers, mothers, whose soul has suffered my suffering,
everything I felt, did you feel it too? (Victor Hugo)

He was traveling a long way, but she would watch him. She was his mother, and
it was all she could do for him now. She could do it. (Maeve Brennan)

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a novel motivated and defined by maternal values. Consequently, along with Fanny Fern, as well as Dostoyevsky and Joyce, Stowe rejects male-oriented, rationalistic responses to suffering. Instead, she urges the breakdown of disconnection between self and other, especially that between free whites and black slaves, and a recognition of shared suffering. Critic Samuel Otter points out that this imaginative attempt to connect is a "central dynamic of nineteenth-century fiction" (22). Stowe, as the exemplar of this period effort, "seeks to contrive an imaginary 'communion'" between African Americans under slavery and her readers (Otter 21). Although she uses imagination to represent the reality of connection, Stowe affirms that this communion is not imaginary, but real. Otter clarifies that Stowe "associates, but does not equate" the *experiences* of slave and free (21-2). Indeed, Stowe expends great energy to stretch what Otter terms the limits of intersubjective and interracial knowledge. Shared vulnerability to child loss is at the center of her efforts to collapse the distance between the slave mother and the free white mother. In her attempt to link mothers across racial and positional boundaries, Stowe reveals a paradox within maternal grief: it is inherently excessive and dangerous, even to the point of destruction and death, yet it enables real connection and compassionate action. In an atmosphere of loss and separation, in which many mothers are forcibly separated from their children through the traumas of death and

slavery, Stowe attempts to connect her characters to each other and her characters to her readers.

Stowe's effort to inspire tears and to form the stock, moral responses of her readers through training their emotions earns her novel the epithet "sentimental." Until the second wave of the feminist movement produced feminist criticism, scholars critiqued Stowe's novel in much the same terms as those leveled at grieving women accused of excessive and dangerous emotion. Scholars considered this novel (and its hero) too emotional and womanly. Indeed, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* serves as the center of patriarchal prejudices that define the entire female American novelistic tradition as too emotional and religious (Morey 123). Such name calling creates distance that insulates the critic from the extension of the universal sympathies Stowe valued. Stowe expected this criticism and pre-emptively lampoons the rational, heartless Marks, who puzzles over a slave woman's extreme grief in response to the loss of her sickly, deformed child. Stowe gives Marks the comment, "Lord, there an't no end to women's notions" (59). Of course, in Stowe's world, those without emotion follow not only the slaver Marks, but the closed-hearted and utterly depraved Simon Legree, whose repression of feeling provides the avenue by which Cassy torments him. By contrast, critic Ann-Janine Morey argues that Stowe's female characters "have a spiritual gift that no one wants to hear, and they are alone, 'shuddering in the midst of mirth and festival with the weight of a terrible wisdom'" (748). Many of Stowe's women understand the nearness of death, and they make no attempt to hide or repress this awareness. Instead, this secret knowledge leads to the perception of the suffering of others and then to compassionate action.

Stowe highlights the role of women, and especially mothers, in active compassion, which Tompkins denotes as salvation through motherly love. This saving sympathy goes beyond mere acts of benevolence. Critic Susan Ryan argues that Stowe asks readers to “identify with suffering people across racial and regional divides” (604). While she points out that “actual proximity and similarity may not exist” between the bereaved white mother and the slave mother, Stowe still asks readers to “imagine or relive the loss of their own children, for example, with the slaves whose actual or threatened losses she represents” (604). But beyond a perceived similarity between the bereaved white mother and the bereaved slave mother, the true effectiveness of Stowe’s novel rests on its revelation that there is really no distance between them at all. By contrast, Stowe’s civilized, intelligent man separates himself from others and, as law-giver, supports the system that creates and enables men like the slave-trader Haley and the slave-owner Legree. This kind of forensic distance epitomizes the basest sin in Stowe’s morality.

It could be argued that Stowe exploits both reader and subject in the highest degree. She certainly exploits the familiar maternal response to grief—the mothers’ expected tears. Indeed, presentations of maternal responses to child death in this novel are meant to access and intensify grief in the reader. Stowe also gives the reader stories in which characters successfully share grief because they deliberately diminish all social obstacles through maternity and the memory of maternal loss. This movement allows characters and readers to cross racial boundaries to mourn on behalf of the other, as Morey suggests. Sorrow and remembrance inspire the compassionate action Stowe seeks from her readers.

Beyond inspiring connection and action, Stowe attempts to personally participate in the act of association. She attributed this effort to two experiences. The first is the famous “vision” she experienced in an evangelical church service that included the celebration of communion (Gilmore 63). Critic Michael Gilmore explains that one Sunday morning as Stowe contemplated the “real presence” of the suffering Christ in the Eucharist, the “image of a bleeding slave” came to her mind (63). In this vision, she sees the beaten and wounded slave in the picture of the crucified Christ. Further, she envisions the presence of the suffering slave in all humanity, since in her theology they are all present in Christ and, thus in each other. Most importantly, the abused slave possesses a superior access to the presence of Christ by participation in suffering. She employs this theology to interest the reader in the slave and make connection desirable. Stowe explicates this view of humanity in Tom’s words to Cassy as she ministers to him after his beating by fellow slaves Sambo and Quimbo. After Cassy suggests to Tom that God has “taken sides against us,” Tom asks her to read an account of Christ’s violent death from his Bible (327). Tom then explains that he believes “jest the contrary” to Cassy and tries to persuade her that God always joins, and sides with, the one who suffers. Critics of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and of Tom’s character despise this theology, arguing that such a stance simply enables the (god-abandoned) oppressor to create more suffering. However, Stowe seems to have understood the meaning of suffering within a doctrine of shared real-presence as enabling individuals to move beyond distanced pity. Comprehending the presence of Christ in the slave, and therefore the slave within oneself, allows the person to internally acknowledge and participate in the suffering of the other.

Stowe identifies and exploits another point of connection, which advanced from another “vision.” The loss of a child, who is often then considered sacred or special, connects women across racial and economic barriers. Stowe’s own “golden,” “summer child” died from cholera at the age of 18 months (Hedrick 190, 196). As literary critic and editor of the Norton Critical Edition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Elizabeth Ammons, explains,

It was motherhood, and the death of her beloved baby Charley, she later said, which quickened her empathy with enslaved Africans. “My heart was bursting with the anguish excited by the cruelty and injustice our nation was showing to the slave, and praying God to let me do a little and to cause my cry for them to be heard. I remember many a night weeping over you as you lay sleeping beside me,” she wrote to one of her children, “and I thought of the slave mothers whose babies were torn from them.” Her own dead baby wracked her mind: “It was at his dying bed and at his grave that I learned what a poor slave mother may feel when her child is torn away from her.” (viii)

Biographer Joan D. Hedrick notes that Stowe harvested her memories of baby Charley’s death and contemplated the meaning of her experience (196, 200). Stowe writes that she could never be consoled for the intense bitterness of Charley’s long and painful death “unless it should appear that this crushing of my own heart might enable me to work out some great good to others” (qtd. in Hedrick 192). Thus she works to close the “distance between the ‘special child’ of bereaved middle-class parents and the exploited slave child,” turning this connection into a “source of political energy” (Hedrick 192).

Ammons concludes her account of Stowe’s maternal loss pointing toward the motivation for her artistic style: “written in tears, the book participates in a sentimental aesthetic scorned by most intellectuals and the academy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries but highly valued by readers in the nineteenth. It is intended to evoke tears” (viii). Stowe believed that tears create connection. Witnessing herself as the slave mother, she asks her

readers to do the same. And through her continual reminders of the final judgment, she also pressures the reader accept a transcendent reality she perceives behind this act of imagination. That is, this imaginative effort toward sympathy finds its basis in the Christian mystical supper, which reveals a real presence shared by, and therefore connecting, all people.

In her use of tears and visionary connection, Stowe normalizes relatively extreme grief responses to child loss. As in the myth of Demeter, maternal grief in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* leads to wild behavior, and Stowe inscribes wild maternal acts as reasonable, typical responses. This book includes many examples of overly emotional and dangerous reactions by slave mothers at the prospect or reality of losing their children. Cassy's "wild, painful" history includes infanticide as a means to protect her son from separation from her into the isolated misery of slavery. Stowe describes Cassy as a Demeter figure, "wildly, mournfully despairing," with a look of "fierce pride and defiance" (320). In another portrayal, Mr. Haley gives an account of the typical "screechin'" mad mother whose child is pulled from her arms to be sold: "I knew a real handsome gal once, in Orleans," he reports. Upon the loss of her child, "she jest went ravin' mad" (5). Haley also tells the story of the "tiger" mother whose blind son he traded for whiskey: "what should she do but ups on a cotton-bale, like a cat, ketches a knife from one of the deck hands, and I tell ye, she made all fly for a minit, till she saw 'twarn't no use; and she just turns round, and pitches head first, young un, and all, into the river,--went down plump, and never ris" (59). Finally, the reader, alongside Tom, witnesses the "Select Incident of Lawful Trade," where the young mother Lucy jumps from the steamboat upon discovering the sale of her ten-month-old son. Awaking to his absence, Lucy cries,

“Why, why,--where?” Haley replies, “your child’s gone; you may as well know it first as last. You see, I know’d you couldn’t take him down south; and I got a chance to sell him to a first-rate family, that’ll raise him better than you can” (117). Haley calmly watches to see if she will “scream, and get up a commotion on the boat” (118). But this “crushed reed” is beyond tears; “the shot had passed too straight and direct through the heart, for cry or tear” (199, 118). Later that night, Tom watches as “something black passed quickly by him to the side of the boat, and he heard a splash in the water. No one else saw or heard anything. He raised his head,--the woman’s place was vacant! He got up, and sought about him in vain. The poor bleeding heart was still, at last, and the river rippled and dimpled just as brightly as if it had not closed above it,” as Lucy escapes “into a state which never will give up a fugitive” (119-20). This same chapter holds the story of the aged Hagar, whose son Albert is sold, and Stowe links this mother to the biblical Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted. In their powerlessness, Stowe’s mothers’ lasting vigilance slides into an extremity often portrayed as madness or fury.

Set within a context of many stories of mothers who have been forcibly separated from their children, Eliza Harris represents the prototypical vigilant mother who, nevertheless, remains vulnerable to loss. Vigilance, aided by wild behavior, rescues her son from the slaver Haley. Stowe describes the watchful Eliza as beautiful, focusing on her “rich, full, dark eye, with its long lashes,” “ripples of silky black hair,” neat dress, and “finely moulded shape,” but uses “mother” as the predominant characteristic (4, 10). The same beauty belongs to her child (13). Stowe describes him as “between four and five years of age . . . remarkably beautiful and engaging” (3), but, as with Persephone, such beauty only increases the precariousness of his position. While Eliza in her vigilance sees

this vulnerability, her “misses” stifles her concern: “But really, Eliza, you are getting altogether too proud of that little fellow. A man can’t put his nose into the door, but you think he must be coming to buy him” (9). This fear for the loss of her son Harry may be amplified by her past losses. Speaking of Eliza’s married life, Stowe writes, “for a year or two Eliza saw her husband frequently, and there was nothing to interrupt their happiness, except the loss of two infant children, to whom she was passionately attached, and whom she mourned with a grief so intense as to call for gentle remonstrance from her mistress, who sought, with maternal anxiety, to direct her naturally passionate feelings within the bounds of reason and religion” (12). Certainly, these multiplied losses increase the reader’s interest and compassion toward Eliza. In addition, Stowe understands her character’s ability to enter into the dialogue of loss in which her readers already participate, creating connection through a natural reverberation of losses.⁴¹ Meanwhile, the deaths of the two infants strengthen and legitimize her intense love for her living child, creating anxiety in the reader who recognizes Eliza’s consequent vulnerability to future anguish. Stowe increases this concern for Eliza and her son by pointing out that “after the birth of little Harry, [Eliza] gradually became tranquilized and settled; and every bleeding tie and throbbing nerve, once more entwined with that little life, seemed to become sound and healthful” (12).

Harry’s beauty and innocence coupled with his vulnerability create a Persephone figure, while the master’s participation in a plan to trade Eliza’s young son links her plight to Demeter’s. Eliza’s beauty and fertility make her a goddess, and her master’s complicity in Haley’s plan demarcates her role as the angry Demeter, since the master as

⁴¹ See Leader.

Zeus allows Hades' (i.e., Haley's) plan of abduction. Further, Eliza's tireless energy on behalf of her son and her furious action of escape link her to the goddess. In her awareness of the living death of slavery, she vows to protect her son. In Eliza's vigilance, she physically carries her Harry away from the slave trader and holds this young child in her arms as she flees across the ice floes on the Ohio River. Here Stowe upends the myth since Eliza's vigilant and wild Demeter rescues her child from the grasping hand of Hades and escapes. Her escape across the Ohio River evokes both the River Styx of Greek myth and the Red Sea that the Israelites crossed to escape slavery in Egypt. In addition, Stowe specifically references the river Jordan, across which she escapes to the "Canaan of liberty on the other side" (47). In Eliza, Stowe unites the supernatural power of Demeter ("stronger than all was maternal love") with Mary's supplication on behalf of the other, since her prayer "Lord, help! Lord, save me!" is on behalf of her son (45).

As Eliza participates in the wrath of Demeter, Stowe herself acts, as Hedrick notes, in "white anger" as she heaps wrath upon the "patriarchal institution of slavery" (201). However, in an effort to recreate the world from a female-gendered point of view, Stowe connects reader and character by engaging the image of the anguished Mary alongside that of Demeter. Eliza's husband George powerfully links her to the Virgin Mary, "what pleasure is it that [Harry] is handsome, and smart, and bright? I tell you, Eliza, that a sword will pierce through your soul for every good and pleasant thing your child is or has; it will make him worth too much for you to keep!" (16). This sword graphically connects Eliza's position to that of Mary, since Stowe is here echoing the elderly Simeon of the Gospel of Luke who warns Mary that "yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also" (2: 35, KJV). The threat of loss connects Eliza to Mary, to

Mary Bird and then to all mothers, extending to humanity in general in the unavoidable communion of suffering and vulnerability.

Likewise, Demeter's fury and Mary's compassion provide a connective thread in Stowe's portrayal of the complicated connections between grief, memory, and speech in the character of Mrs. Bird. Mary Bird images forth the Christian Mary in her mildness: "Mrs. Bird was a timid, blushing little woman, of about four feet in height, and with mild blue eyes, and a peach-blow complexion, and the gentlest, sweetest voice in the world" (71). In her interactions with Eliza, Mary Bird's demeanor and actions link her to the compassionate mother of Jesus. John Gatta points out that Mary Bird is a "figure of divinely redemptive womanhood," who possesses, "the sacred power of maternal love" (416). Beyond the obvious linkage of her name, Gatta recognizes a more general Marian symbolism in Stowe's feminized Christianity that "stresses the motherly compassion of Jesus, the natural sacramentality of love, and the creative power of spirit and intuition" that Mary possesses (417).⁴²

By Stowe's estimation, womanhood is by nature silent, and speaks only when forced by the impetus of maternal memory. Like Fanny Fern's Ruth, Stowe must justify her speech, and through Mrs. Bird's person and opinions, Stowe justifies both that lady's speech and her own. Speech can both represent a wild action and produce such action. The Marian virtues of pity and selflessness allow Stowe's women to act in more masculine ways, since these virtues motivate their fury and lawlessness. Stowe also justifies herself, and Hedrick clarifies in regard to Stowe's fury "that it was anger *for*

⁴² One additional linkage of Mary Bird to the virgin Mary is her activity in knitting a pair of slippers for her husband in his absence (Stowe 70), connecting her to the sacred Marian activity of knitting the shroud for the temple.

others went a long way toward excusing this breach of proper womanhood” (201, emphasis original). Stowe vividly connects compassionate love and violent passion in her description of Eliza as she attempts to escape: “stronger than all was maternal love, wrought into a paroxysm of frenzy by the near approach of a fearful danger” (45).

For Stowe, only a dire need for maternal love justifies speech: When Mrs. Bird learns that Senator Bird has supported the fugitive slave bill, Stowe writes, “now, it was a very unusual thing for gentle little Mrs. Bird ever to trouble her head with what was going on in the house of the state, very wisely considering that she had enough to do to mind her own” (71). Stowe’s ostensibly ideal woman moves into “resolute” and “determined” speech only when others are vulnerable, motivated by her belief in empathy and aid as the ultimate measures of humanity. “There was only one thing that was capable of arousing her,” Stowe writes, “and that provocation came in on the side of her unusually gentle and sympathetic nature;--anything in the shape of cruelty would throw her into a passion, which was the more alarming and inexplicable in proportion to the general softness of her nature” (72). Mrs. Bird’s son explains her susceptibility to “passion” as he describes her response to the abuse of a kitten. Speaking of her discipline of him after she caught him throwing stones at the kitten, he says, “I was scared that time. Mother came at me so that I thought she was crazy” (72). Here the gentle Mrs. Bird enacts the mad fury of Demeter, and that fury moves the quiet Mrs. Bird to speech and action.

Because of the fugitive slave act, even across the river, “the shadow of *law*” pursues Eliza and her son, but in the household of Mary Bird, law is vanquished with compassion. Stowe uses the domestic, maternal sphere to inform the political. Mrs. Bird

names the Christian duties of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and comforting the desolate as essential virtues and actions, and these Christian values in turn reflect the duties of a mother, of whom Mary is the Christian ideal. Reference to these compassionate actions alludes to the final judgment, calling to mind Christ's words, "inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25, KJV). Mary Bird's reference to these Christian duties represents one of numerous allusions to the final judgment in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe centers her obsession with the final judgment on the only reference to it in the New Testament, which appears in a section of the book of Matthew regarding "the kingdom of God."⁴³ She places this law of mercy above the law against "aiding and abetting" escaped slaves (71). "It's a shameful, wicked, abominable law, and I'll break it, for one, the first time I get a chance," she says, referring to the fugitive slave act, adding, "things have got to a pretty pass, if a woman can't give a warm supper and a bed to poor, starving creatures, just because they are slaves, and have been abused and oppressed all their lives" (72). She later affirms, "I must feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and comfort the desolate . . . would you turn away [the] poor, shivering, hungry?" The helpless child is ever the

⁴³ Matthew 25: 32-46: And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another . . . Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was hungry, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee hungry, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, *Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.* Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: For I was hungry, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. . . . *Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal (KJV, emphasis mine).*

symbol of the “least of these.” And in Stowe’s novel, motherhood always has an affinity to Christian charity and love. It is in the context of the biblical parable and Mrs. Bird’s son’s story that Eliza arrives cold, hungry, only partly clothed, and certainly desolate. Her vulnerability is only surpassed by her young son’s.

The validity of Eliza’s escape is wrapped up in this vindication of speech, since the legitimacy of her escape is founded upon maternal love, the presence of which serves to both prove Eliza’s humanity and vindicate extreme action. Eliza’s and Mrs. Bird’s speech, and the actions that follow, are predicated on fury. Eliza herself appears wild; Stowe uses wildness to describe her language, speech, and behavior (74-6). When asked about this wild and illegal behavior, Eliza responds with, “Ma’am . . . have you ever lost a child?” (76).

Eliza appeals to the maternal memory that gives Stowe’s female characters fury for action. In regard to Eliza, wildness proceeds from the prospect of separation from her child, while Mrs. Bird bases her illegal behavior on the memory of her dead child and the recognition of Eliza’s vulnerability to a similar loss. These two women speak openly about child death and loss. Stowe writes that Eliza’s question was “thrust on a new wound; for it was only a month since a darling child of the family had been laid in the grave” (76). In response to Eliza’s question, Mrs. Bird “burst[s] into tears; but, recovering her voice,” she speaks: “Why do you ask that? I have lost a little one” (76). Eliza trusts that this shared experience alone will lead to Mrs. Bird’s action on her behalf: “Then you will feel for me,” and she further justifies her own and Mrs. Bird’s responses with, “I have lost two, one after another—left ‘em buried there when I came away; and I had only this one left. I never slept a night without him; he was all I had. He was my

comfort and pride, day and night; and, ma'am, they were going to take him away from me,--to sell him down south, ma'am, to go all alone, --a baby that had never been away from his mother in his life" (76). Eliza later reiterates, "this child is all I have" (77). The whole Bird family responds with the tears that mark compassionate identification and merciful action throughout Stowe's novel.

In order to help Eliza, Mrs. Bird delves deep into maternal memory. "Mary, I don't know how you'd feel about it, but there's that drawer full of things—of —of —poor little Henry's," says Senator Bird. Mrs. Bird keeps mementos of her son in a room attached to her own, but behind a locked door. She accesses this hidden room on behalf of Eliza and Harry. Stowe writes that Mrs. Bird

opened the little bed-room door adjoining her room, and taking the candle, set it down on the top of a bureau there; then from a small recess she took a key, and put it thoughtfully in the lock of a drawer, and made a sudden pause . . . Mrs. Bird slowly opened the drawer. There were little coats of many a form and pattern, piles of aprons, and rows of small stockings; and even a pair of little shoes, worn and rubbed at the toes, were peeping from the folds of a paper. There was a toy horse and wagon, a top, a ball,--memorials gathered with many a tear and many a heart-break! She sat down by the drawer, and, leaning her head on her hands over it, wept til the tears fell through her fingers into the drawer; then suddenly raising her head, she began, with nervous haste, selecting the plainest and most substantial articles, and gathering them into a bundle. (79)

Eliza's plea forces Mrs. Bird into this secret room. And yet she willingly enters based on compassion. The necessity of maternal memory is illustrated by Mrs. Bird's continued possession of Henry's things—attachment to his memory creates the situation in which she has something to give to Eliza's son Harry. Maternal memory affirms the shared experience of loss and the shared vulnerability to grief, and it consequently plays an essential role in Mrs. Bird's responsiveness to Eliza's plea. Shared grief translates what

could be distanced pity for the “least of these” into sympathetic identification: the Birds help Eliza not because of their difference, but because of their likeness.

In direct address to the reader, Stowe pressures mothers to access their grief: “And oh!” she writes, “mother that reads this, has there never been in your house a drawer, or a closet, the opening of which has been to you like the opening again of a little grave? Ah! happy mother that you are, if it has not been so” (79). Stowe describes the feelings she later ascribed to Mary Bird in a letter to a friend describing her son Charley’s possessions: “I cannot open his little drawer of clothes now without feeling it thro my very heart” (199). The burial place of Mrs. Bird’s son’s things mimics the innermost heart, hidden away in the dark, locked with a key. The description of this concealed room and its relationship to memory’s locus in the mother’s secret heart bring back the words of Fanny Fern in regard to the mementos that Ruth keeps, and Ruth’s assumption that others also retain such mementos and memories in the “secret chamber of [the] bereaved mother’s heart, where never more the echo of a childish voice may ring out such liquid music as death hath hushed” (48). For the author as for her characters, accessing this painful memory connects mothers to each other and allows for action.

In regard to loss and potential loss, Mrs. Bird and Eliza respond with transgressive wildness, most obviously when they break the law. Yet they consider themselves fully in control of their morality, if not of their circumstances. Indeed, the women’s wild, criminal behavior infects even the law-giver himself, as Senator Bird assists in Eliza’s escape, emboldened by the same memory that motivates his wife. Senator and Mrs. Bird reject the law in their ability to feel the loss threatening Eliza. Stowe not only pulls the reader into Eliza’s vulnerability and Mrs. Bird’s grief, she

reminds the reading mother that the slave's child is her own lost child just as Senator Bird recognizes Harry's connection to his own son, as he observes him wearing "his lost boy's little well-known cap" (81).

The law of man goes up against the final judgment, where (patriarchal) law ultimately gives way to (female-gendered) mercy. Morey argues that "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* is given its distinctive character not simply by its ardent polemic against slavery, but by an underlying critique of rational, intellectual, man-made systems," including theological systems (748; see also Gatta 523). Stowe repeatedly quotes scripture against the legal and religious systems that perpetuate slavery. And women and slaves (like Mary Bird, Eliza, and Tom), whose position allows them to inhabit a more spiritual, intuitive world, evangelize against the sinful (though lawful) slave system (Morey 748). Sitting in judgment on lawmakers and citizens who detach themselves from the misery of slavery, Stowe attempts to enter the poverty and suffering of the other, bringing the reader along with her.⁴⁴ She assumes a point of connection between women as co-sufferers and then exploits it as a motive for compassion and moral action on behalf of the racial other.

The idea that individuals can and must remove emotional, spiritual, and physical barriers rests on Stowe's understanding of the Judeo-Christian concept of the day of judgment. As with Mary Bird's words proceeding her interaction with Eliza, Stowe focuses on Christ's statement that whatever anyone does for the "least of these," he or she does "unto" him. Thus, Stowe impresses upon readers their personal responsibility for the

⁴⁴ Dostoevsky participates in this action when he caricatures this stance in the "angry and squeamish" doctor from Moscow who seems to be "afraid of dirtying himself on something" as he visits the impoverished and dying child Ilyusha (559). The reader consequently sides with Ilyusha's weak, irrational, and emotional father, crying (sentimental) tears when Ilyusha says, "and don't ever forget me Papa." Dostoevsky gives the reader, in his father's response, that Psalm of extreme grief, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my tongue cleave . . ." (561-62).

suffering of the slave, even for readers who would consider themselves to be outside the circle of guilt, with no direct participation in either slave abuse or slave ownership. Thus, all whites in North America are implicated in the sin of slavery, a sin which is revealed in the body of the wounded slave, just as it is present in the wounded Christ, and the pierced heart of his bereaved mother.

Cassy, remembering what she learned about the day of judgment as a child, denotes this future moment as the time “when everything is coming to light” (335). She believes in her ultimate power to reveal and judge the wrongs against her. “They think it’s nothing, what we suffer,--nothing, what our children suffer,” she says of the masters, “and, in the judgment day, I will stand up before God, a witness against those that have ruined me and my children, body and soul!” (335). In a “frenzy” of grief and fury at the memory of her lost children and at Legree’s subsequent abuse, she threatens to make this future judgment present by her own action: “devils . . . keep pushing me on and on—and I’ll do it, too, some of these days!” she says with “an insane light . . . in her heavy black eyes. ‘I’ll send him where he belongs,--a short way, too, --one of these nights’” (335). Her fury is dangerous, but the light Stowe describes in her eyes reveals her ability to see and reveal things as they are, a revelation Cassy believes will be shared by all at a future time when everything comes “to light.”

However, Stowe shows this future judgement to be present judgement in the last interaction between Uncle Tom and Legree. In Stowe’s assessment of humanity, Tom represents the ideal human, since, with his “brave, true heart” he remains free to act morally and compassionately, even in the face of torture (377). He participates in the Christian ideal of humanity when he helps and forgives his tormentors. By contrast,

Legree resists the “blank pause” of mercy, a moment where time enters eternity. Stowe describes this spiritual reality, writing that the “tick of the old clock could be heard, measuring, with silent touch, the last moments of mercy and probation to that hardened heart” (376). The judgment becomes present and final as Legree renounces his humanity and loses all ability to act with compassion. Stowe describes his soul as “past repentance, past prayer, past hope, in whom the fire that never shall be quenched is *already burning*” (377, emphasis mine). Legree loses the power to act on behalf of the “least of these.” Importantly, Legree rejects the memory of his dead mother. He burns the lock of hair she leaves him, and tries not to think about her. This attempted forgetting makes it easy for Cassy to torment him, but it also makes it easier for Legree to act without compassion or mercy.

The final judgment already resides in her characters, so that whatever they presently do, or fail to do, for the vulnerable and suffering, they do for a suffering and grief-stricken God. Their current spiritual and emotional states reflect this reality, which is also linked to memory of the dead. For Stowe, those who reject compassionate action lose freedom of will, and the last judgment already lives in them. Meanwhile, those who choose mercy already stand in Tom’s “eternal love” (358). Stowe’s view of love as a “natural sacrament” includes her vision of “a ladder to heaven, whose base God has placed in human affections” (Gatta, quoting Stowe, 418). Memory, especially maternal memory, and the lasting grief that resides in memory, allow her characters to access this internal ladder and act with compassion. In this maternal-valued world, compassion is a cosmic event that extends beyond time. From the differently ordered perspective of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, excessive mourning doesn’t lead to illness, but refusal to remember does.

Memory plays an important role in Stowe's effort to connect the middle class white mother's special child and the black slave child. She figures the special child as the "brighter & better" holy child that God always seems to demand of the parent (Hedrick 191). Biographer Hedrick points out that "by focusing . . . on the separation of children from parents, Stowe tapped the overwrought feelings of white, middle-class parents and enlisted their sympathies for slave parents through the powerful metaphors of an evangelical religion shaped by both loss and bondage" (193). Hedrick connects this brighter and better child to Little Eva, whom she calls the "apotheosis" of the "special child" (191). Like Stowe's son Charley, Eva gives way to the "capriciousness of a Calvinist God, to whom there was no recourse but submission to his disciplinary rod," and Hedrick links this awful conception to that of an overseer holding the destiny of slaves.

The evangelist of love, Eva St. Clare is beautiful and innocent, like the defenseless Persephone. Further, descriptions of her golden curls and head, her portrayal as an angel, her activities of Bible reading and evangelism, and her ministrations to the seemingly unlovable all mark her for sainthood. As with the child Harry, these characteristics portend vulnerability. Indeed, the descriptions of Eva conjure up Ruth Hall's Daisy, and many have already connected this sweet, naïve character to Louisa May Alcott's Beth and Charles Dickens's Little Nell. As with Beth, Little Nell, and Daisy, Little Eva's exaggerated, angelic character destines her for an early death. As the special, saintly child, Eva demands the memory of her servants and family. Giving out locks of her hair as mementos, Eva says, "I have something to say to you, which I want you to always remember," adding, "you shall always remember me. I'm going to give you a curl

of my hair; and, when you look at it, think that I loved you” (264-65). But Eva lacks a mother like Demeter, since Marie possesses neither vigilance nor memory. In an effort to form and direct the emotions of her readers, Stowe provides the foil Marie to show her readers what she considers a negative bereavement response—i.e., without a recognition that sorrow is common and shared, and without a change in personal beliefs and behaviors. Marie neglects Little Eva during her life, and although she perpetually faints while crying violent tears upon Eva’s death, she grieves in the same selfish and despotic way that she acts.⁴⁵ The selfish, forgetful Marie serves as a counterpoint to the selfless and remembering mother Mary Bird. Stowe passes judgment on this other Mary/Marie as she describes her response to the death of Eva: “Marie’s room was darkened, and she lay on the bed, sobbing and moaning in uncontrollable grief, and calling every moment for the attentions of all her servants. Of course, they had no time to cry,—why should they? The grief was *her* grief, and she was fully convinced that nobody on earth did, could, or would feel it as she did” (273, emphasis mine). In direct opposition to Stowe’s virtue of shared suffering, Marie separates her grief from that of others, and refuses to see that others suffer. She refuses memory in ignoring her daughter’s dying plea on behalf of the slaves. Instead of freeing them, she sells them at public auction. In this, she forgets the reality of her dead child, rejecting her plea for memory, and thus possesses no capacity for compassionate action.

Remembrance leads to connection for Stowe, but a stance of distance protects from the uncomfortable empathy of engagement and the central question of mortality. Stowe makes every effort to deny her readers the refuge of detachment in their feelings.

⁴⁵ e.g., 263, 264, 274. 296-97.

Thus, she grants herself permission to engage, speak, and reveal the reproach of suffering and death. She extends this permission quite intentionally to that most painful reproach of the dead child, thereby highlighting both shared and personal responsibility for the vulnerable infant. She resists a stance that would separate the living from the dead or the sufferer from her community.

Such distance exists in our current psychological categorization of intense grief as prohibited or anomalous. Defining intense grief as mental illness alienates bereaved mothers, excluding them from normative life and pushing their healing and connection toward medical professionals and outside of the community. This pressure to make death invisible, cogently described by Ariès, means that culture attempts to contain and control grief by moving the bereaved mother outside of the community in order to keep her grief from intruding on its life (DeSpelder and Strickland 329).

Stowe by contrast places mourning in the center of her novel's world, rejecting any impetus to take the edge off the fearful mystery of death with words or perspectives that seek to hastily silence grieving. An effort to live with grief points toward an intensified awareness--like the parent who talks about "coming to terms" with the death as a part of preparing to "die peacefully" (Rosenblatt 110). "This is a matter of the soul," Zosima's mysterious visitor explains, "a psychological matter. In order to make the world over anew, people themselves must turn onto a different path psychically. Until one has indeed become the brother of all, there will be no brotherhood" (303). In an effort that resembles Stowe's, Dostoevsky attempts to abolish the law of isolation. Psychoanalyst Darian Leader argues that the mourner enters the symbolic universe in order to refashion it, since "everything is affected" by the death of the other (107). While Stowe would

certainly reject Leader's perspective on the meaning of the symbolic, we see in her response to the death of her child an attempt to reorder her world so that the suffering person (both the symbolic and the real sufferer) resides at its center. She recognizes the upending of everything by death, she witnesses loss as something that cannot be entirely comprehended, and then she intentionally participates in that upending and incomprehension in order to refashion her world.

Thus, Stowe uses and extends bereavement as a mode of access to the shared, sympathetic, faithful, and inward. Grief prepares us for empathy so that entering into grief is essential, maintaining grief is assumed, and productive action is based upon the moment of grief, not its exclusion from perception or memory. Even in the relative safety of the Birds' household, Eliza remains vigilant, retaining her tight hold on her son. As she sleeps, she resists "with nervous anxiety, the kindest attempts to take him from her; and even in sleep, her arm encircled him with an unrelaxing clasp, as if she could not even then be beguiled of her vigilant hold" (74). Hannah Foster's Eliza Wharton evoked this central aspect of motherhood when she hoped that "the little innocent I bear may not live as a monument of my guilt . . . the greatest consolation I can have, *will be to carry it with me to a state of eternal rest*" (146, emphasis mine). The "believing" mother in Dostoevsky's story continues to carry her child along with her, even in his death, as represented by the mementos she shows to Zosima. And, this same vigilance for her own dead child, enacted through memory, gives Mrs. Bird the power for (com)passionate action.

A focus on narrative challenges the basic theory of grief work (Rosenblatt 12). Narrative perspectives can question the efficacy of "closure" or "letting go," and some

researchers and therapists do point to potential benefits of “fully experiencing the process” of grief (Kersting 51). They believe that “the goal of grief counseling should be to foster a constructive continuing bond with a deceased person” (51). However, this perspective still asks the bereaved to discover meaning in the death or to “[find] a silver lining in loss” (51). And in spite of challenges to the popular model of grief work, Rosenblatt points out that it remains the dominant theory (12).

By contrast, scholar Peter Balaam writes that “over the past two decades, death and mourning have achieved a central place in early American studies,” and he points out that nineteenth century authors such as Emerson, Warner, and Melville “regarded [the] conventional approaches to the grave as inadequate to the real misery and mysteriousness of loss” (14, 15). The views of grief contained in the writings of Stowe point to a similar critique of the current, reductive stance of the Psy-disciplines. Stowe presents mothers who hold onto their agency by retaining their right to struggle and by rejecting any imposition of a superior grief. Instead of glorifying grief that is quickly resolved, she assumes and exploits the extended and extreme nature of parental grief.

Memory of the dead, especially painful memory, leads to open speech and compassionate action. Stowe’s ability to talk about death flows from her comfort with others’ discomfort, and her belief that her readers need discomfort. She unashamedly rationalizes her speech by the present need for maternal compassion. From Stowe’s perspective, this maternal grief resides deep in the identity of women, and she depends upon its presence to justify speech and inspire action. By contrast, to help bereaved people achieve emotional balance, grief therapist and scholar Robert Neimeyer believes that researchers should focus on the subset of grievers who show “remarkable resilience”

to understand how they “are successful in coping with loss and developing constructive methods for continuing their lives [to help those] who are more likely to struggle.”⁴⁶ Even though Neimeyer supports a continuing bond with the deceased, he defines those who “struggle” as individuals who believe relationships with family and friends have changed, who experience feelings of meaninglessness, or who experience ruptured beliefs as a result of the death of another. These definitions function within the APA’s limit on healthy grief, so that those painful experiences and feelings should be resolved within a year, along with feelings of yearning for the deceased. But the value Stowe places on lasting memory challenges cultural efforts that would define the normative grief process as brief, instead presenting those who continue to remember and struggle— “those whose sorrows all spring up into joys for others, whose earthly hopes, laid in the grave with many tears, are the seed from which spring healing flowers and balm for the desolate and the distressed” —as the ideal. Stowe’s characters’ acts of charity are often predicated on extended longing for the dead and the rupturing of former beliefs, which lead to an authenticity that acknowledges an affinity with and memory of death.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Kersting.

Chapter 3: Emily Dickinson and Maternal Grief as Unknowing Knowing

Emily Dickinson's poetry and letters reveal the same affinity with and memory of death that Stowe valued. Dickinson's work shows that she puts into practice Stowe's imperative to enter the suffering of the other while exemplifying the ability of shared grief to create community and connection. Dickinson works to enter, and even extend, the emotional stance of intense grief, occupying the grief of the other in her effort to console, and personally practicing the virtues of memory and compassion that Stowe demands.

"The small Heart cannot break—The Ecstasy of it's [*sic*] penalty solaces the large—Emerging from an Abyss, and reentering it—that is Life, is it not, Dear?" Dickinson wrote to her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson a year after the death of Susan's young son Thomas Gilbert Dickinson (Gilbert) in October 1883 (Johnson letter 1024). Like Stowe, Dickinson expects intense and extended grief, since she desires the large heart that causes such sorrow. She expects continued suffering, since movement away from the abyss of loss is only temporary. And she uses expected and accepted sorrow as a form of connection to her sister-in-law, a mode of access to the shared and sympathetic.

Gilbert's death was a "crisis of sorrow" from which neither woman recovered. Dickinson writes of her "nervous prostration" and explains her commitment to language in the time following Gilbert's death in a letter to Mrs. J.G. Holland: "I hesitate which word to take, as I can take but few and each must be the chiefest" (letter 873). And along with her own acknowledgement of a careful effort to find the right "word," critic Jane Donahue Eberwein's asserts that "there could be no one all-purpose letter of condolence" in response to Gilbert's death (105). Indeed, Eberwein points out Dickinson's tendency to

“extend condolences gradually rather than try to sum up all memory, comfort, and acknowledgement in one letter” (105). Accordingly, Dickinson stayed with her sister-in-law’s grief and kept memory along with her, continuing to write letters to her about Gilbert until Dickinson’s own death nearly three years later.⁴⁷

Dickinson searches for the right language to name and share her sister-in-law’s grief. Yet, while the apparent purpose of the letters and poems is to provide consolation, they are not exactly what we might consider predictably comforting. Sewall points out that while the letters to Susan following Gilbert’s death are “the tenderest [*sic*] since their girlhood” (204), they contain no traditional language of comfort and little direct acknowledgement the mother’s bereavement (205). Instead, Dickinson asserts her own participation in the shared bereavement and engages deeply in her method of paradox as a catalyst for spiritual knowledge. When faced with the boundaries of language, Dickinson applies paradox and contrary images and language in an effort to comprehend death and the meaning of grief.

Critic Thomas W. Ford’s assertion regarding the supreme influence of Dickinson’s interest in death on her poetry coincides with her unremitting effort in crafting letters of consolation to friends and family. Dickinson wrote many condolence letters, often including or embedding poems about death or grief, as with her letters to Susan. Critic Janet Buell convincingly argues that these letters extend Dickinson’s literary and metaphysical development in important ways (324). However, while Elizabeth A. Petrino argues that Dickinson’s child elegies question the validity of nineteenth-century “consoling fictions,” she also believes that the letters themselves

⁴⁷ E.g., Letters 869, 874, 908, 911, 912, 938, 1024, 1025.

occasionally convey false feelings, since they affirm or engage normative, “conventional” responses to death and grief (Petrino 318, 333; see also McNaughton). This accusation of conventional leans toward the well-known criticism based on the exhibition of emotion in women, and often aimed at Stowe: sentimental. Certainly for critics analyzing work from the nineteenth-century, conventional means sentimental. Some, like Petrino, have suggested that Dickinson’s letters of consolation reveal her proclivity to succumb to the influence of her culture’s attitudes toward death and the afterlife (Petrino 333, Buell 327; see also McNaughton). This criticism may extend to her poetry, which Buell asserts exemplified the consolation genre (329).

Certainly, Dickinson interacted with contemporary modes of consolation, and engaged deeply in the experience of grief and loss. She stayed with the bereaved and with her own grief. And if the letters and their poems are conventional, perhaps it is because Dickinson sought to connect with the reader. If she seems to skip the furious questioning of her poetry to move toward more immediate connectedness in her letters, she illustrates connectedness as an equally valid response to loss as the fury of her endless questioning. In any case, Buell argues that her writings maintain her typical slant in order to transform traditional ideas of solace (330), and this is true insofar as she refuses easy answers. Dickinson attempts to wrest consolation out of ambivalent views of death and the afterlife, and in Buell’s perspective, her poems’ “startling Dickinsonian reversals” save them from mere sentimentality (329). But, when Dickinson’s death poems seem to mock traditional views, it is easy to miss how Dickinson uses levity to intensify seriousness (not to dismiss it), and how she uses mocking, critical language to point beyond itself (Anderson 73). Thus, McNaughton says, “the answer is a riddle” ringing with the

unknown (204). Yet, McNaughton's unknown isn't merely left as a question, it is approached in an effort to reach beyond the known.

In an effort to reach beyond the known, Dickinson presents impediments to tidy answers and complications to poetic form. Apophatic poetry allows Dickinson to confront the mysteries of death and grief, so that it is through the use of enigma and contradiction that Dickinson reaches toward truth beyond language and experience and thereby seeks to disrupt the philosophy, theology, and emotional balance of the recipients of her condolence letters, even where the ostensible purpose is comfort. Thus, for example, assertions of continued or resumed connection are balanced by the mystery of disconnection and the blank of death.⁴⁸ Employing paradox in this way reaches experientially beyond faith and doubt into the unknowable mystery of death and our shared journey into it.

Dickinson approaches her topic through apophatic language and images, which keeps the reader in an attentive and unsettled state, matching the naturally disrupted state of grief. This effort coincides with Dickinson's effort to hide truth while revealing it. The poet describes the work of revealing while hiding in more than one poem,⁴⁹ and her practice of engaging attention by interrupting verse with riddle is well known. In a statement of aesthetic perspective, Dickinson writes:

Sunset that screens, reveals -
Enhancing what we see
By menaces of Amethyst
And Moats of Mystery. (1644)

⁴⁸ Such as in the third poem Dickinson sent to Susan, which begins with "Expanse cannot be lost—," but ends with, "the Troops are gone!" (Franklin poem 1625).

⁴⁹ "Tell all the truth but tell it slant" is a familiar example (Franklin poem 1263).

Here Dickinson presents a physical image that allows us to see something outside or beyond it, while simultaneously describing the process. Poet and critic Kathleen Raine insists that the work of the poet is creating an awareness of some idea that “can only be apprehended poetically, some true cosmic or metaphysical apprehension of what Coleridge calls ‘the eternal in and through the temporal’” (28). As Dickinson’s language creates a lasting visual for the reader, her contrast of the beauty of “Amethyst” with “menaces” reveals the conflict of joy and danger contained within the contemplation of the mysterious. Interestingly, she uses a similar phrase to Susan after the death of Gilbert in regard to his “Secret” knowledge in his approach to death: “With what menace of Light he cried ‘Don’t tell, Aunt Emily!’” adding the epithet “ascended” to the dead child (letter 868). This journey also describes the work of the poet, who wants to make a “Secret” known to herself and others, and therefore tries to find language or an image that does not arrest “the movement of ascent precisely at the threshold of the invisible” (Constas 22). Thus, her work embodies the words of theologian Clement of Alexandria, as she “artfully conceal[s] the seeds of knowledge . . . so that they may be sought after with desire, and unearthed only after much toil” (quoted in Constas 22). Paradox is a key method in attaining such spiritual apprehension, and it is the bereaved who present themselves as open to this spiritual, contemplative effort. Thus, she employs this central aesthetic in her letters to the bereaved, including those she sent to Susan upon Gilbert’s death where paradox assists the unsettling effort to provide a complicated solace. The idea of movement into the unknown is a predominant conceit in these letters.

In her first letter to Susan after Gilbert’s death, Dickinson includes poem 1624 (Franklin), which looks at the transition to death as a momentary journey that admits the

possibility of continued connection. But she also writes of those still living as embarking on a slower journey whose end is unknown. This poem appears at the end of a rather long letter judged by Sewall as the finest she ever wrote (204). Eberwein takes this compliment further, calling this letter the “most awe-filled and wondrous letter-poem of her life” (117).⁵⁰ The letter uses poetic language and ends with a contrast between the sorrow of the living (who are left in “Night”) and the movement of their “little Ajax” spanning “the whole” (Johnson letter 868). In addition, Dickinson mentions eternal life, secrets, and Gilbert’s mental and physical quickness, which she refers to as “velocity,” a word denoting movement in relation to time. She alludes to an un-severed connection between the living and the dead when she writes, “show us, prattling Preceptor but the way to thee.” These words highlight the prospect of some future or present form of spiritual contact, pointing toward, but not confirming, reunion between herself, Susan, and Gilbert. The poem she includes encompasses many of the same concepts that she explores more explicitly in the letter:

Pass to thy Rendezvous of Light,
Painless except for us -
Who slowly ford the Mystery
Which thou hast leaped across!

Dickinson also included this poem in a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson upon a gift to him of J.W. Cross’s *The Life of George Eliot*, where she notes that, “biography first convinces us of the fleeing of the Biographied” (Johnson letter 972, and note).

Dickinson’s re-use of this poem in connection with George Eliot suggests her satisfaction with its language and meaning, while intimating absence as the central meaning of the

⁵⁰ She holds that other critics share her view (118, 102).

poem. In this exploration of death, the living and the dead possess a shared destination that is cloaked in the positive language of “Light.” Meanwhile Dickinson leans toward a lack of suffering—apart from the temporary suffering caused by separation from the living. Indeed, this suffering may only be experienced by the living, based on the ambiguous “pangless except for us,” even though this language also suggests that the dead miss the living. Along with the phrase “Rendezvous of Light,” the use of the words “pangless” and “leaped” give this poem a hopeful tone. The increasingly active verbs add to this optimistic tone while imparting a sense of movement within death: pass, ford, and leaped. In the rest of the letter, we see that this imagined movement is based on Gilbert’s “sweet velocity” (letter 686), that is, his ability to leap toward light. “Rendezvous” itself suggests meeting or connection, while the dead beloved, in this instance the child Gilbert, is seen as connecting with light. Along with the shared destination between the living and the dead (the other side of mystery), “rendezvous” suggests the possibility of the re-connection between the living and the dead.

The journey here is hopeful, but its context is one of loss, and the possibility of reconnection or return is an idea toward which Dickinson displayed ambivalence. For example, in her letter to Mrs. J.G. Holland following Gilbert’s death, she questions a “more” beyond the grave: “more than love and death?” she famously asks, “then tell me its name!” (Johnson letter 873). Such opposition between despair at disconnection and the hope of reunion exists in other letters after Gilbert’s death (see, for example, Johnson letters 871 & 872), but the next letter to Susan takes on a less conflicted tone on the surface:

Climbing to reach the costly Hearts
To which he gave the worth,

He broke them, fearing punishment
He ran away from earth. (1626)

Such simple meter and language, along with a straightforward rhyme scheme (worth/ earth), conceal the somber theme of the poem. The poet's bemused tone is complicated by the hard fact of death and the mystical idea that the dead are present somewhere. In his essay, "The Metaphysical Mirth of Emily Dickinson," Paul W. Anderson points out that Dickinson "confronts death directly, dramatically, often comically," adding that such a comic slant allows her to readily approach the ineffable (76). Her wry tone toward her subject in this poem allows her to approach mystery while engaging the chilling thought that the journey which begins with an effort to reach the hearts of those he loves (and by loving gives value to) ends in a journey away from them and their place of existence—"earth." In addition, the goodness of the child who gives value to others by their love for him hearkens to what Sylvia Hoffert describes as romantic notions about the purity and heavenliness of children (607). But this vision of childhood is complicated by his guilt for doing damage to others. Indeed, this view contrasts with contemporary ideas Hoffert elucidates that considered the deceased child a redemptive agent who connected the living to the spiritual world (609), since the poem admits only painful departure in the end. The idea that the loved and lost child brought worth to his family also reflects the cultural idea Stowe employed of the special child that God demands, thereby reaching toward the conflicted idea that the good child is in especial danger, tacitly at the hands of an angry and dangerous God. Thus, Dickinson again returns startling pathos to the common experience of the utter breakdown in connection between the living and the dead. The light language of the poem distorts its heavy topic, which is the painful loss and absence of the beloved. Like the first poem,

this brief second poem uses a journey metaphor, since the dead child “climb[ed]” the costly hearts on a journey for love, and abandoned this journey for one “away from Earth.”

This and the other two letters to Susan immediately following Gilbert’s death make use of a journey metaphor. In his article “A Circumference of Emily Dickinson,” Robert Gillespie argues for journey as Dickinson’s key metaphor, where the journey becomes “the passage of the spirit into Death, Eternity, Immortality, and Heaven,” and where self extends to reach out toward the “furthest limit of meaning” (253-54). The artist goes beyond the “confinement in mortality, beyond the limits the human imagination normally recognizes” so that language is her mode of both “apprehending and revealing” the truth about reality (254-55). Like Joyce and Dostoevsky, Dickinson repeatedly employs the journey metaphor, not least of which when she is considering that opaque transition from life to death, and again when she considers the perceived movement from wholeness to loss. She is both willing and unwilling participant in this transition. Loss and suffering precipitate such a journey. Based on his interpretation of the meaning of Dickinson’s use of the word “circumference,” Gillespie argues that Dickinson is always seeking a new state, a movement into what he calls grace, always precipitated by suffering (257-59). For Gillespie, Dickinson uses the term circumference to indicate this “prior condition and a metamorphosis into a new and vastly different one” (256). Dickinson avoids the use of the word “circumference” in any of the poems written in response to Gilbert’s death. However, she evokes the central idea of the term, an idea crucial to much of her thought, with her use of “Rendezvous” in the second poem and “Expanse” in the third, which suggest the ideas of eternity, connection, and spiritual

movement contained in circumference. And this language also indicates that the journey of the dead child and of the bereaved family are connected, their destination a shared, single point.

Both of these first two poems contain the language of journey, but neither contain the searching, punishing fury of Demeter, or channel Demeter's desire to forcefully regain the child, such as Dickinson used in another poem written in the year after Gilbert died:

Back from the Cordial Grave I drag thee
He shall not take thy Hand
Nor put his spacious Arm around thee
That none can understand (1649)

Here we see Demeter's fury in the desire to drag the child back from the grave. The personification of the grave evokes the god Hades, while "Cordial Grave" suggests the kindness and civility of Hades as Death from Persephone's perspective in the much earlier "Because I could not stop for Death" (479). But in the poems contained in her first letters to Susan, Dickinson avoids this fury and moves straight for connection and memory. Meanwhile, she places the central action for the journey within the purview of the dead child, while the living bereaved do not fully understand their destination, apart from its connection to the child.

While "Climbing to reach the costly Hearts" ends in mounting withdrawal and disconnection ("He ran away from Earth—"), the last two lines of "Pass to thy Rendezvous of Light" ("Who slowly ford the Mystery/ Which Thou hast leaped across!") end with a hope for reconnection. This reconnection may occur when those who remain living cross the waters of death to find the lost beloved. The language in the earlier poem also suggests a present effort to reach the beloved, which is linked to a movement into

mystery. The idea of crossing a barrier (i.e., “slowly ford[ing]”) and the announcement of “mystery” lean into the enigmatic poem Dickinson included in a subsequent letter to

Susan:

Expanse cannot be lost-
Not Joy, but a Decree
Is Deity-
His Scene, Infinity-
Whose rumor’s Gate was shut so tight
Before my Beam was sown,
Not even a Prognostic’s push
Could make a Dent thereon –

The World that thou has opened
Shuts for thee,
But not alone,
We all have followed thee –
Escape more slowly
To thy Tracts of Sheen –
The Tent is listening,
But the Troops are gone! (Franklin 1625)

In this third poem, she retains a sense of association between the living and the dead within the journey metaphor. In spite of the mid-poem finality of “Whose rumor’s Gate was shut so tight,” which suggests little hope of any knowing beyond the grave, Dickinson’s effort to affirm connection exists in the more buoyant “We all have followed thee -/ Escape more slowly.” Such language suggests not so much a future re-connection, as the possibility of continued connection. In her book contemplating death and grief, Sandra M. Gilbert writes about the simultaneous sense the bereaved feel of both the “nearness and farness” of the location of the dead (16). “Those who seem so near,” she writes, “whose country has become so incontrovertibly real to the mourner, are yet so far: they’re inhabitants of a distant land that is nevertheless absolutely ours” (16).

Sandra Gilbert resolves this uncomfortable experience with the Freudian assessment that the feeling is a fantasy to be overcome through the struggle for detachment (16). Freud's idea means that the logic of the closed gate attains supremacy, so that detachment, the goal of mourning, may be obtained. However, in this poem, Dickinson holds to the impression of connection, dismissing the goal of detachment through her mention of the effort of following and listening. As in the former poem, Dickinson evokes the sense of something crossed or passed. But here crossing happens along with, or shortly following, the dead. Death becomes an "escape" that the living follow into "more slowly." By contrast, she also affirms that "not even a prognostic's push could make a dent thereon"; that is, even if we had a prophet who could know the future, he still would have no idea what lies beyond the moment of death. Simply—the solidity of the closed door admits no seeing or reaching beyond it. The image of the shut gate, beyond which no movement or vigilant watching on the part of the living can trespass, is at odds with the bereaved's action of following in line 12, as well as the affirmation in the first line that "Expanse *cannot be lost*" (emphasis mine). The bereaved are understood to follow "more slowly" (lines 12 and 13), i.e., they will enter that gate later, so that it is understood the gate will be opened for the bereaved upon their own deaths. Yet, Dickinson chooses the past, not future, tense for "we all have followed thee" (12). Importantly, Dickinson's removal of the direct question from the first draft of this poem, "adversity if it may be/ Or wild prosperity" (Franklin 1616), which preceded the line "Whose rumor's Gate was shut so tight,"⁵¹ reduces the sense of the speaker's lack of knowledge about the actuality and consequences of death, and adds ambiguity to her

⁵¹ Based on the poem's placement in *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson, it seems to have been written earlier in 1883.

point that since “Rumor’s gate was shut so tight,” we cannot enter into death physically or imaginatively.

In the same vein, the original version of this poem⁵² lacks movement within its verbs, “die,” “shut,” “born,” and “push,” apart from the two verbs that refer to the speaker’s living state (“walks and works” in line 1). Of course, die and born create the pressure of conflict, but the main action is the ineffective “push” the prophet enacts upon the tightly *shut* gate. By contrast, as comfort to her sister-in-law, while Dickinson’s revised poem retains “shut” in the second stanza, she balances it with “opened,” “followed,” and “escape.” The riddle of “followed” creates conflict in the version Dickinson sent to Susan. This remade poem focuses on the contradiction between the shut gate of separation and the actions of connection.

The poem begins with the perplexing, but hopeful, “Expanse cannot be lost,” which forcefully denies the finality of loss, and therefore, death. However, Dickinson concludes the poem with absence, a real loss envisioned: “The Tent is listening, / But the troops are gone!” In addition, the direct contradiction between the core of the poem, the section beginning “Whose rumor’s Gate was shut so tight” and the initial phrase, “Expanse cannot be lost,” as well as with the second stanza’s “shuts for thee, / but not alone, / We all have followed thee,” complicates the sense of the poem, and creates a

⁵² This Me- that walks and works-must die
Some fair or stormy Day-
Adversity if it may be
Or wild prosperity
The Rumor’s Gate was shut so tight
Before my mind was born
Not even a Prognotic’s push
Could make a Dent thereon-

paradox within the speaker's conception of the presence of the dead. This brazen ambiguity holds the meaning of the poem.

The invocation of Deity in the first stanza inserts ambivalence about her seemingly assumed right to question the closed gate. "Not Joy, but a Decree/ Is Deity - / His Scene, Infinity --" she asserts in the first stanza. Here Dickinson acknowledges the pain of the closed gate, and Deity's participation in maintaining this limit. In this poem, Deity's place and focus is infinity, and this Deity possesses the prerogative of setting the limits. These boundaries create pain, and the line, "not Joy, but a Decree," suggests the boundary does not take happiness into consideration. These lines even hint that death is the only law and reality with the authority of a god.

Yet, there is a feeling of protest in this poem, beginning in the first stanza. While she seems to embrace the conventional idea of an omnipotent God ("Deity" who sets the Decree) within eternity ("infinity") wherein the dead are retained ("Expanse cannot be lost"), her complexity of tone and images creates ambiguity. This complexity of tone allows the poet to embrace and judge an attitude at the same time (Anderson 75). Dickinson seems to be considering herself in the position of God-interrogator regarding the authority of death, and in this way, she follows after the first and foremost God-questioner, the Biblical Job. God responds to Job's inquiry into divine justice and the meaning of suffering with His own questions, such as the well-known, "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?" The book of Job gives no answer regarding the why of suffering and death, but within the questions God poses to Job exist myriad assertions about setting boundaries, including creating the "gates of death." The author of

Job has God bounding the waters of the earth and the daylight in language that Dickinson has appropriated for her poem:

When I made the cloud the garment thereof, and thick darkness a swaddlingband for it, and brake up for it my *decreed* place, and *set bars and doors*, and said, Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further: and here shall thy proud waves be stayed? Hast thou *commanded* the morning since thy days; and caused the dayspring to know his place? . . . Have *the gates of death* been opened unto thee? or *hast thou seen the doors of the shadow of death?* (Job 38:4, 9-12, 17 KJV, emphasis mine)

By evoking Job, Dickinson also invokes God's reply to his famous inquisition. The incongruity between her acknowledgement of these decreed bounds and her unwillingness to accept the bounds positions the poet as seer and witness. Meanwhile, association with Job points to the meaning of suffering and death as something that even a god can only explain with more questions. Dickinson's attention to Job's inscrutable God of divine darkness allows her acknowledgement that spiritual truth is experientially apprehended, not logically communicated.

Based on this assessment of knowledge, Dickinson's poem in the form she sent to Susan takes the paradox of absence and presence further than either of the others by confusing images of the closed gate and empty tent with statements denying loss. The very first word of the poem gives an important clue to this riddle of distance and proximity. "Expanse" is central to Dickinson's apophatic poem, and the affinity between the expanse of line 1 and the infinity of line 4, based on their shared meaning as heaven, paradise, and the afterlife,⁵³ reaches toward the definition of circumference as a radiation outward and a journey inward, both without end, but with a sense of curving back infinitely.⁵⁴ In addition, expanse includes expansiveness and expanding, which nears the

⁵³ Emily Dickinson Lexicon. edl.byu.edu/lexicon, "expanse" and "infinity."

⁵⁴ See Gillespie for this definition.

definition of infinity as boundlessness and endless extension, both of which relate to Dickinson's use of circumference to contain the ideas of limitlessness, eternity, and even understanding.⁵⁵ Finally, cosmic expanse presents an unknowable, uncontained idea that allows for both doubt and belief, and reaches back to the opening of her letter to Susan: "Hope never knew *Horizon--*" and, "Moving on in the Dark like Loaded Boats at Night, though there is no Course, there is *Boundlessness--*" (Johnson letter 871, emphasis mine). With these metaphysical words in the context of the journey through rumor's Gate into "The World that thou has opened," Dickinson enacts what Gillespie has described as a movement from a prior condition, or a metamorphosis into a new and vastly different one for both the dead and the living. The bereaved mother's journey becomes a spiritual ascent precipitated by grief, and her poem highlights and encourages this act—what art critic and theologian Maximos Conostas describes as "not simply a movement 'upward,' but equally a movement inward" (28).

Her appropriation in this poem of the Biblical aesthetic of confronting the reader with stumbling blocks reaches toward an aesthetic Conostas terms the "paradoxical, obscure, intractable, and offensive" and creates an opportunity for her to overwhelm, not simply please, the senses, and to therefore push her reader toward a spiritual, logically unreachable truth (21). Her form mimics this effort, since she rejects the Romantic values of perfection and balance, instead favoring the surprise and interruptions of slant rhyme, irregular punctuation and spelling, and metrical and rhythmical interference.⁵⁶ This method, used within this and other poems of consolation, reflects an ironic desire to

⁵⁵ *ibid.* "circumference."

⁵⁶ Ryan Cull adds that she goes so far as to upset Romantic ideals of subjectivity in "Beyond the Cheated Eye: Dickinson's Lyric Sociality." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 65.1 (2010): 38-64.

unsettle the reader she would comfort. This same desire is matched within the intellectual and mystical content of the poem, where she employs “images to overthrow the power of images” to “disrupt habituated ways of seeing” in order to “[free vision] by confronting it with the invisible, proposing to it that the boundaries of the possible are wider than they seem” (Constas 22).⁵⁷

Sandra Gilbert writes about how experiencing the death of a spouse, child, or other loved person opens us up to the “plausibility of death” and reveals our intimacy with it as we stand on the “threshold” of death’s “kingdom” (7). Attempting to explain the bereaved one’s new mystical connection to death, Gilbert considers the “weird familiarity” of “the place where the dead one has ‘gone’” (7). The affirmation of connection that Dickinson writes about in “Expanse cannot be lost –” is reminiscent of the new awareness of the bereaved that centers on their newly born familiarity with death. As with other poems in which Dickinson addresses the experience of the intense finality of absence the living experience when someone dies⁵⁸ or what critic Paul W. Anderson terms “the terrible incomprehensibility of the eternity of the silent dead” (76), Dickinson speaks to this absence in her final phrase, “the Tent is listening, / But the troops are gone!” These two lines may be the most puzzling among the poems Dickinson sent to her sister-in-law. Tent is a temporary dwelling for the active troops who enliven it, and therefore may refer to the body that Gilbert has left behind, so that the troops are his soul, the “spirit” that “lurks within the Flesh” of a subsequent version of “Expanse cannot be lost” (Franklin poem 1627, “The Spirit lasts- but in what mode-”). The troops certainly

⁵⁷ Constas uses this language to describe the efforts of spiritual writers and artists in their approach to art, and I have appropriated this description for the poetic work of Emily Dickinson. He, of course, is not thinking of her.

⁵⁸ For example, “Under the Light, yet under,” and “Those who have been in the Grave the longest.”

encompass the idea of Gilbert as the soldier Ajax, in his velocity and prattling liveliness. Yet the dead body listens, which implies an expectation of the return of the absent soldiers. If the tent is the body and the troops are the spirit or soul, the continuing activity of the tent, while the troops are simply “gone” upends a notion of the lasting liveliness of the soul and the dusty, deadness of the body, even if a tent itself is not a lasting dwelling. Meanwhile, the imagery of tent, i.e., tabernacle, alludes to the biblical tent that once held an abiding and holy god, not to mention the mother’s womb that temporarily holds the child, most importantly the womb of Mary whose “gate was closed” having given birth to the holy child.⁵⁹ If tent is both child and mother, perhaps only the mother continues listening.

Certainly, however, the paradox of the assertion that Expanse cannot be lost and the troops’ subsequent absence, or lost-ness, from the tent pressures the language and idea near nonsense, especially in the way the poem begins with an affirmation against loss, but the final lines conversely restate, reimagine, and assert that loss. This clash employs Gillespie’s “polarities necessary for tension” (468). And the purpose of such tension is hidden within the logic of the poem, where the intensity of the feeling of absence exists even when those who follow are ultimately imagined as retaining their connection to the dead. This contrast illustrates Sandra Gilbert’s simultaneous impression of the nearness and farness of the dead. Those who follow remain with the dead in the “World” that he has opened, where they have “followed” him, though their “escape” goes “more slowly.” This language mirrors the living who “ford the Mystery,” but more

⁵⁹ Ezekiel 44:2. This theology is ubiquitous in both the eastern and western church. See, for example, the writings of Saint Augustine. Mary is also the “gate of heaven” (see the work of Cardinal John Henry Newman, among others).

“slowly” than the dead in the earlier poem. Of course, the destination of the living and the dead, “Tracts of Sheen,” is the same, but these tracts already belong to the beloved dead. Both the former and the latter poem affirm a mutual destination, which can be read simply as finality within death, or as encompassing the more hopeful vision of a “Rendezvous of Light” or “Tracts of Sheen.” This latter phrase evokes the shining brightness of the light in the initial poem Dickinson sent, and “tracts” are sections of land and allude to a physical place. Tracts also sounds like track, which is a pathway, and a word Dickinson uses to refer to the journey through death. For example, in “Because that you are going,” she uses the idea that she may “overlook [the] Track” of her dead beloved (Franklin poem 1314). Together, tracts and sheen contrast the mystical, airy, and light with the grounded location of destination.

Such language gives a sense of hope, but it is the closed, and in fact only rumored, “gate” that holds the center of this poem. The living cannot know what is beyond the gate of passage from this life to the next, nor do they really know if the gate exists at all. Dickinson employs the metaphor of a gate that is only rumored, and a world to whom the passage is now opened, but not for the living. Absolute silence disconnects the dead from the living, who cannot know the place (tract) of destination. This lack of knowledge about the other side of the “gate” is heightened by the addition of “Not even a Prognostic’s push/ Could make a Dent thereon.” The image of a prophet, a *seer*, pushing on the closed gate in an effort to see beyond it suggests the poet’s effort to see what was shut “Before [her] Beam was sown.” Yet the gate was shut even before she lived (i.e., before she was conceived as a seed, or before she was planted, let alone bloomed to life) or tried her light (her “beam” of light) upon this dark Gate that shuts out all beams of

light, and the vision that would require light. Thus, the ambiguity between the closed gate and the presence of the dead exemplified by the survivors' following, and perhaps listening, reveal the meaning of the poem as connection within disconnection, nearness within distance.

Sandra Gilbert identifies only skepticism as the motive for Dickinson's myriad viewpoints from which she "described the indescribable" when it came to death (353). But Dickinson seeks comprehension in describing the indescribable, which is why she applies such pressure to language through the use of absurdity and contradiction. This language of contradiction and negative theology seeks to imaginatively move toward what she doesn't properly *know*, what is impossible to know within the nominalist framework of her (and our) generation's philosophy, but which nevertheless she seeks to plumb with contradictory, enigmatic language. Dickinson explores the substantial, concrete, and tangible,⁶⁰ but the motive of this obsession with vision, feeling, and touch should not be misunderstood. "As sense perception deepens into spiritual contemplation," Constan writes, "vision is flooded with clarifying light, for 'contemplation alone is the resolution of things which at the literal level seem contradictory, since it can demonstrate the truth which is incorporeal in all things'" (quoting Maximus the Confessor 24). Even if such ineffable knowledge can be achieved, it is not easily expounded. But, the unsettled state of mourning leaves the reader searching for a comforting word, and Dickinson seeks to provide it: "I wish I might say one liquid word to make your sorrow less" she writes to her friend Charles H. Clark (letter 859). But she does not attempt to eradicate grief in her reader, instead dwelling on the finality of death while both employing and questioning

⁶⁰ See Gribbin, for example.

consoling responses to its reality. The open-ended nature of her poetry leaves the reader working to resolve the conflicts within it while allowing ambiguity to facilitate a state of wonder and contemplation. In this action, she successfully voices the feminine experience(s) of grief, acknowledging the limits of language while striving to move beyond its bounds. Further, Dickinson accepts Stowe's imperative to enter into the suffering of the other, and by doing so exhibits a way of interacting with the bereaved that is at odds with efforts that would facilitate its closure or completion. Her approach shows no discomfort with the other person's bereaved state, since she and the other unite in grief. Moreover, she does not signal that she expects this grief to be short-lived, controlled, over-come, or hidden. Instead, she assumes that any action in grief works not toward its end, but in staying with the dead, to live with them in the bereaved understanding that one's own destination ultimately coincides with theirs.

In these poems she seeks to both represent the violent separation of death and affirm the continued relationship between the bereaved and the dead. Meanwhile, Dickinson doesn't treat the grief as belonging entirely to her sister-in-law, but as an essential part of their continued relationship. Rosenblatt explains that "U.S. culture gives the ownership of grief to parents and not to the whole society and expects the parents to handle their problems on their own" (94). By contrast, seeing no value in separating herself from the grief, or allowing Susan to separate herself, Dickinson creates no protective boundary. In a letter to Susan a month after Gilbert's death, Dickinson writes,

The first section of *Darkness* is the densest, Dear—After that, Light trembles in—
You asked would I remain?
Irrevocably, Susan—I know no other way— (Johnson letter 803)

Dickinson enters the grief and claims it as her own so that maternal grief becomes both the channel of connection and the basis of an apophatic experience of truth.

Dickinson's poems and letters to Susan following Gilbert's death invoke a journey whose movement is both inward and outward, whose potential return does not mean a reversal to an earlier mode, but signifies only the arced possibility of homecoming and connection. This journey that Dickinson is willing to share with her bereaved sister-in-law and her dead nephew highlights her practice against ignoring or attempting to make memory and its attendant grief dissipate. In the face of the experience of death, only denial of its truth, which would coincide with an erasure of the beloved, could move toward a comfort that means ease and security. She shows no effort toward reaching resolution or the acceptance of absence. With poems written for the overt purpose of consolation, Dickinson subversively exploits the unmoored feelings of maternal grief to push herself and her reader toward sacred knowledge. Conflict within the ideas and language of the poems maintain this irresolution, allowing the bereaved to remain in their confusion while reaching toward mystical knowledge. Placing value on irresolution conflicts with the goals of therapists like Neimeyer who aim to help clients resolve incongruence between the reality of death and one's sense of safety and meaning, along with helping the client return to former core assumptions such as a belief in control over one's life, a belief in one's worthiness of positive outcomes, and in the conviction that the world is generally benevolent (75). Such language of backward movement implies a return to a former state, an idea prevalent in the psy-disciplines and the culture at large.

As the living approach the closed Gate within their grief, the dual vision of the nearness and the farness of the beloved dead (along with the consequent suffering) creates the opportunity for a transition that allows new spiritual awareness. Engagement with paradox works against the false and easy answers of forced closure. By tripping us up with conflicting images and ideas, Dickinson invites us to pay attention to the poem's inner logic and meaning as a method of progressive entrance into truth. She shows us that grief itself is an opportunity for this entrance, a shared journey into the mystery of death.

Concluding Thoughts: Memory and Comprehension

Our dead are never dead to us until we have forgotten them. (George Eliot)

Now, to the living, only grief has shown
The little yellow of the violet
Risen again out of the dead year's leaves,
And grief alone is measure of the love
That only lives by rising out of graves. (Wendell Berry)

Literary work, in its relative comfort with ambiguity and perplexity, complicates the effort to scientifically define how sad is too sad. Engagement with uncertainty allows us to consider the potential benefits of intense grief while not reaching toward easy answers that minimize it. Contemplating stories and poetry that focus on maternal grief reveals gaps in the social sciences' considerations of it. While interdisciplinary dialogue promises benefits for bereaved mothers, such efforts are not likely to provide understanding or ideas about how mourners can recover more speedily or efficiently, since the humanities in general, and literary pursuits in particular, eschew efficiency and conclusive answers.

If such a dialogue were to exist, it would take place amidst a cultural argument about the nature of suffering and death and amid confusion and disagreement regarding the meaning of motherhood itself. Disagreement as to the correct response to the death of one's child, intensified by growing discomfort with the paradoxes of motherhood, aligns with what some have noticed as a cultural push toward viewing motherhood itself as something to be "gotten over"—i.e., mothers return to the equilibrium of normal life only when they return to a life that does not require caring for children (Offill & Morris). While the writers considered here value maternal grief outside of a framework of functionality, pharmaceutical sales, or contribution to the gross domestic product, their

positioning of relatively more intense maternal grief as normal, beneficial, and potentially desired could still provide balance in the ongoing effort in the social sciences to judge the validity, quality, or success of the grief of the other.⁶¹ And, indeed, attitudes toward grief that define healthy mourners as those individuals who return within six months (or sometimes a year) to previous levels of productivity and perceived well-being seem willfully narrow-minded in light of these deeper contemplations into the meaning and nature of bereavement.

“Don’t we all treat suffering as a disruption to existence, instead of an inevitable part of it . . . what would happen if you could ‘reincorporate your version of reality, of normalcy, to accommodate suffering,’” asks *New York Times* writer Jon Mooallem.⁶² Dickinson and Stowe ask us to enter precisely that version of reality; they center their penetrating gazes on the intractable realities of death and grief and seek to re-order the world around them. In their effort, they do not reach back toward normalcy or functionality. Instead, they try to break down the barrier between self and the suffering other. Reading mourners have long turned to writers like Stowe, Dickinson, Joyce, and Shakespeare to understand their own losses. More generally, centuries of thought in the humanities have worked to help us make sense of our lives and our world, especially in light of the realities of suffering and death. Mourners turn to poets for shared experience and the saving word. We read Dickinson for fortification, wisdom, and a grasp of life’s deepest, and therefore essentially unquantifiable, occurrences. Literary critics must begin

⁶¹ While my analysis indicates many of these writers considered more intense grief desirable, the works presented here also often possess a vehement denial of any effort toward achieving the proper result (spiritual or otherwise) or recognizing the hidden blessings of loss (See Abercrombie as quoted in Desiree Henderson’s *Grief and Genre in American Literature, 1790-1870*).

⁶² Partially quoting B. J. Miller.

to find ways to acknowledge and assist this action, lest we neglect the central purpose of humanities for the culture we mean to serve.

The APA maintains a position of power when it comes to the cultural discourse about grief. Researchers and therapists produce categories, terms, and therapies to control grief; these enter the common cultural discourse and then the mind of the mother, affecting her interaction with and view of her own emotional response.⁶³ The current line of APA inquiry and its proposed categorizations stigmatize the bereaved mother as a failure since she does not get over her loss, and her too persistent and too intense grief make her prone to the label of mental illness. Given their power, it is essential that APA members' work continues to focus on opening up definitions of appropriate grief and begins to affirm the right to grieve, even when grief extends in a way that is uncomfortable for mourners or those around them. A mother's right to wild grief and her continued connection to her child are paramount for her and, as literature tells us, for her community. The role of steadfast memory in many literary representations reveals the initiated mother's new affinity with death--a realization that her continued connection to her dead means that death is a part of her. She resists efforts to silence her, to strip her of remembrance. Bereaved mothers attain George Eliot's "new state," perceiving a secret, terrifying knowledge.

Likewise, the bereaved parents in Rosenblatt's book point out the offensiveness of the language of letting go—of either their grief or their dead child—or of getting over their loss (95). "No parent," he writes, "claimed to have gotten over a child's death or

⁶³ See an explanation of how diagnostic descriptions shape how people describe their own experiences in Ami Harbin, "Disorientation and the Medicalization of Struggle." *The International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* vol. 7, no. 1 Spring 2014, pp. 99-121.

that it was possible to get over it” (117). Rosenblatt states that in their grief narratives parents often report that the grief process does not “end in forgetting the child or having no feelings of grief, the grief does not disappear” (111). “I don’t think it’s anything you ever get over,” the mother Joy reports (111). Rather, bereaved parents hold to the memory of and connection to the child, but let go of former false assumptions. As poet Scott Cairns writes, “the occasions of our suffering are capable of revealing what our habitual illusions often obscure, keeping us from knowing. Our afflictions drag us—more or less kicking—into a fresh and vivid awareness that we are not in control of our circumstances, that we are not quite whole, that our days are salted with affliction” (7). A new reality, and the understanding that accompanies it, become a part of bereaved parents’ lives. Thus, mothers can consider the feelings of grief to be unresolved, even though they have “gotten used to the idea” that their child is dead.⁶⁴

So far, the mystery of existence contained within the experience of the bereaved mother has refused objectification and dismantling. Societies always work to control emotional responses to death—through theology and rituals, mannered behavior and language, and, of course, social pressure to abide by accepted cultural customs. The efforts of the APA and other psy-disciples are no different. However, the keen eye of literature tells us that bereaved mothers demand memory and continuity, and they move forward only by placing the child’s death in a central location within identity and worldview. Authors like Stowe and Dickinson affirm that grief is both a legitimate end in itself and a point of departure for virtuous action and authentic spiritual experience. Looking into grief yields an honest recognition of human limitation while affirming

⁶⁴ Rosenblatt, quoting the bereaved mother Amy, p. 120.

human (i.e., humane) connection. Bereaved mothers may or may not be able to wrest meaning from their losses. But they do not get over, move past, or “close the book” on them.

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